

# WHAT'S THE VALUE OF A DEGREE? GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE OF THEIR UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES.

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GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE OF  
THEIR UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES.

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by

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis sets out to analyse perceptions of the legacy value of an undergraduate degree from graduates at different distances since graduation. This perspective has not been systematically sought within higher education today. Submission of the work comes as attention in England is focused on 'teaching excellence' and Government expectations that a higher education degree should deliver lasting value to graduates and taxpayers alike. Thus the work has importance in providing new research identifying that the graduate voice supports more realistic student expectations and effective curricula.

Underpinned by constructivist theories of research (Kukla, 2000) and learning (Dewey 1916) the study sought to understand the value of a degree through the experiences and perceptions of graduates. It explored with them how they recognise and allocate value within well-established areas such as economic/financial, academic and personal, defined by previous researchers including Barnett (1990), Mezirow (1991) and Caul (1993).

A mixed methods two-phase study gathered quantitative and qualitative data from 15 interviews and an online survey of 202 graduates from universities in England across all institutional mission groups. Graduates were invited to examine and allocate the relative value of their degree in economic/financial, academic and personal terms.

The primary conclusion was that whilst 99 per cent of graduates perceived value in their degree they attributed least value to the economic/financial benefits. This indicates a discrepancy between graduate perceptions of value and the hegemonic cost/benefit discourse that underpins political policy around individual

tuition fees. The findings additionally determined a statistically significant relationship between students' entry motivation and graduate perception of degree value. Graduates whose entry motivation as students had been to meet the expectations of others were more likely to perceive lower value in their degree than those motivated by personal aspiration and a career goal requiring a degree. Graduates reporting the highest value perceptions also evidenced self-authorship during their degrees.

The relationship between high perceptions of value and likelihood to recommend a degree or institution emerged as statistically significant. Analysis of the findings resulted in the creation of a conceptual model of graduate perception of value which recommends institutions resource drawing on the graduate voice to develop and sustain value within and surrounding a degree to sustain their work.

The findings revealed implications for sustaining student enrolment and institutional advancement in an increasingly commercialised, competitive and marketised sector. The thesis demonstrates ways in which regular collation and publication of graduate perceptions of value evidence, and inform, the legacy of undergraduate degrees across the sector and from specific institutions.

## Acknowledgements

My family, my colleagues and students past and present have been inspirational on this challenging but fascinating learning journey. They sparked my initial curiosity and have supported me in developing my research skills to realise answers which I hope will be of interest and value to the sector and to individuals.

Thank you to all who participated in the research. Without your insight and enthusiasm for sharing your university experiences this research would not have been possible.

Having the opportunity to explore a burning question has been a privilege. For all who have supported, chivvied, encouraged and enthused me through the process over many years and many mugs of coffee – thank you.

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## Glossary

ASCL	Association of School and College Leaders
BCC	British Chambers of Commerce
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DEL	Department of Employment and Learning
DETI	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
DLHE	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education
FE	Further Education
GDP	Gross Domestic Profit
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HECSU	Higher Education Careers Services Unit
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI/s	higher education institution/s
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Council
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IA	Institutional Advancement
IoD	Institute of Directors
KIS	Key Information Sets
LEA	Local Education Authority
MBA	Master of Business Administration
Million+	university think-tank
NAHT	National Association of Head Teachers
NIACE	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
NSS	National Student Survey
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
NUS	National Union of Students
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OFT	Office of Fair Trading
OIA	Office of the Independent Adjudicator
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PG	Postgraduate
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SATs	Standard Attainment Testing
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education
SU	Students Union
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UCU	University and College Union
UG	Undergraduate
UKPSF	United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework for HE staff
VSA	Voluntary System of Accountability (United States)

### **Acronyms specific to this thesis**

SRM	self-reported measurement of value
VAS	value added score
AVI	academic value indicator
OVS	overall value score

### **Terminology**

Alumni	In this work alumni and graduates are recognised as connected but not always interchangeable. Alumni are recognised as constituting a wider body than those who may have graduated with degrees.
Graduate Premium	the sum which a graduate can be expected to earn relative to a non-graduate
Hegemonic discourse	Hegemonic discourse is well described by Atherton (2013) as “ <i>one which has become so embedded in a culture that it appears silly to ask ‘Why?’</i> ”
Institutional Advancement	alumni relations, fundraising, public relations, internal and external communications, and government relations to foster understanding and support for a university
Mission group	Group of universities with similar goals, ethos and aims
Student Voice	Individual and collective involvement of students’ views and opinions in their education.
Widening participation	Widening participation: a government-driven initiative to increase the number of students from under-represented groups participating in higher education

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*“Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.”*

Douglas Adams (2009:109)

## Preface

This thesis seeks to answer questions I have faced as a parent, an academic and an academic developer about whether there is value in an undergraduate degree and if so where that value lies, and how can it be maximised by individuals and by the higher education (HE) sector.

Alice is 18. Her sister Freya is 17. Alice applied to university through UCAS<sup>1</sup> whilst at school, had five offers to study a degree she chose for its apparent career prospects and relevant skills, but she admits she had doubts if it would be worthwhile going to university. She toyed with apprenticeships, with work, but admitted she wanted to go to university ‘like everyone else’. She heard at Open Days and read in glossy prospectuses how much a degree would benefit her through a brilliant social life, exciting academic work taught by industry experts and how it would propel her towards a graduate job with great prospects.

She was accepted into her first choice of university. Her doubts faded, and as she looked forward to her new life she was worrying about meeting new people and having to cope with day-to-day living rather student debt or the value of her chosen pathway.

“The realisation will hit me when I’m on my own. Uni will give me independence, skills, contacts and friends. I will probably grow up more, become more mature because of it. I want to get a good job, and it’s what I think is expected of me, by my family and my teachers. I know I’ll be in the first year to be paying £9,000. Does that £9,000 a year worry me? No – not really. If it’s worth it for what you want to do in life, then it’s worth it.”

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<sup>1</sup> UCAS - The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, a charity providing information and admissions for most UK university and colleges.



Most of Alice's friendship group went to university, either directly from school or via a gap year of travel or work. Only one sought and secured an apprenticeship. As Alice began as a fresher, Freya was on the tour of Open Days and preparing her own UCAS application.

Alice's case study is replicated by hundreds of thousands of school leavers every year. By choosing to go to university they made a series of highly significant, life-changing judgements based on expectations which they will articulate in similar ways to her:

That the experience is going to be worth the tuition fee debt she will incur because it will benefit her future ["If it's worth it for what you want to do in life, then it's worth it"].

That the experience of university is about far more in personal terms than academic or employable skills and knowledge. ["Uni will give me independence, skills, contacts and friends."]

What is interesting is how undergraduates are making life-defining, financially demanding judgements often on impressions, anecdotal and hearsay evidence of value rather than hard facts from those who have the experience of hindsight.

Alice's story is one reason for this study, for a desire to know whether graduates identify value in their degrees, whether this varies between institutions, or indeed whether that value is realised across generations.

Alice and Freya are my daughters. I have no personal experience of the value of an undergraduate degree, and no experience of the institutions or courses where they are headed. My experience as a part-time self-funded mature postgraduate student with children to care for and a business to run was life-changing. It made me aware of the breadth of value which can be achieved by academic study, and equally aware that the current methods for evaluating and thus comparing institutions and their provision are insufficient to capture this breadth.

As an academic developer I encounter many lecturers, particularly new lecturers from different disciplines who express concern, even despair at what they see as the futility of their work in an over-credentialised society where they feel they are developing aspirations with no substance. One lecturer was despairing: "I feel that I am perpetuating the myth that they will get jobs because of their degree which will be fulfilling and exciting – but I know most of them won't. I don't know if I can carry on this deceit day in, day out." As a lecturer I found the feedback from graduates I had taught was essential and sustaining – it informed my practice and my faith that what I was doing had value, and it had a role in sparking this work. However what graduates were saying to me about the value they perceived was not something I was seeing reflected or indeed considered by every academic, informing their modules or their work with every student, or reflected across the sector.

## Introduction

### Thesis Rationale

This research is an attempt to understand value in an undergraduate degree, how it arises, where it is situated and thus how it can be enhanced. It seeks the perspective of graduates at different distances from their degree to how they allocate value and to understand the factors which influence their perceptions. It seeks to identify whether there is truth in the predominant hegemonic discourse of economic value and potential in systematically seeking the insight of graduates (hereafter referred to as the graduate voice) to inform prospective students, the higher education sector and policy makers.

Higher education today faces increasing competition, significant change and rising costs to institutions and individuals resulting from political policy and subsequent funding decisions. An emphasis on employability, the graduate premium (earnings said to be related directly to possession of an undergraduate degree), a political aim to increase the graduate numbers without strain on the Treasury, and the resulting rise in individual contributions continue to increase scrutiny of the value of undergraduate degrees. The Teaching Excellence Framework consultation (BIS, Nov. 2015) focused attention on legacy value.

The value of a degree has been the subject of public discussion often conducted in the media whose headlines have conflicted with the higher education sector's messages to prospective students that 'going to university' will be an investment for the future. The changing environment of higher education has altered identities in higher education - students are now termed consumers, producers, change agents and partners, whilst academics have become teachers, facilitators of learning, entrepreneurs, researchers, and held responsible for student satisfaction. Students' unions too are struggling with new roles as key agents for delivering student satisfaction in the corporate institutional environment (Brooks et al, 2015). The 'student experience' has in some institutions resulted in entire new departments to meet and manage expectations of students, and the multiple stakeholders now engaging with universities. A series of central metrics are in place to produce information for new students (Key Information Sets); monitor satisfaction of existing students (National Student Survey); and check

employment six months after graduation (Destination of Leavers of Higher Education). Significant investment is made within individual universities to develop effective relationships between students, institutions, academics and employers.

The importance of wise investment in education is essential for students, institutions and governments alike. However, current systems of evaluation in relation to the way in which that return is evaluated and indeed constituted appear ripe for enhancement as recognised in the Green Paper (BIS, 2015).

Political policy has demanded that students are equipped to make an '*informed choice*' about their higher education (Browne, 2010). One size in higher education does not fit all, but could the degree experience be tailored more effectively through better informed approaches? How do we know if a degree has lifelong impact? What do we know about attitude and knowledge pre-degree and could these have any impact on how graduates perceive value in their degrees? Does every institution really know what and where its graduates perceive value or even if they do perceive value in their degrees? Is that information available to inform prospective students and academic programme reviews?

Graduates with their beneficial hindsight appear to be the missing link in demonstrating whether a degree really can 'set you up for life', and are witnesses as to whether it has lasting benefit. As costs of higher education escalate institutions need to increasingly generate income through multiple pathways, including their current and alumni populations, through research and through public recognition of the value of their work to society.

### **Theoretical underpinning**

The work takes a constructivist "interpretivist" approach to employ a mixed methods methodology drawing on the graduate voice directly through interviews and survey responses. The thesis is underpinned by the experiential learning theory of Dewey (1933), and reflective practice model of Rolfe et al (2001).

## Contribution to knowledge and importance of the work

This thesis contributes to knowledge by understanding the value of a degree from the graduate perspective. It examines what and where graduates perceive value and how this aligns to the hegemonic cost/benefit discourse that has underpinned individual tuition fees.

Through this research and analysis of graduate responses the work seeks to:

- understand value allocation by graduates to inform prospective students faced with a variety of choices post their compulsory education;
- identify whether the graduate voice can provide the higher education sector with useful information at a time when the value of university degrees is under considerable public scrutiny;
- provide informed analysis for institutions and academics for application during degree courses to enhance value to current and prospective students;
- inform academics in an increasingly pressured environment about ways to maximise curricular to augment perceptions of value.

This study recognises that as degree costs rise for individual students, their families and HE institutions, understanding and maximising value within a degree is increasingly important.

As institutional advancement<sup>2</sup> gains significance the consequence of alumni<sup>3</sup> as ambassadors grows. The role of the graduate particularly in developing learning about, for and with their institutions to inform the degrees on offer and the students who will be studying is a key part in academic communities of practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Institutional advancement – alumni relations, fundraising, public relations, internal and external communications, and government relations to foster understanding and support for a university (Muller, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> In this work alumni and graduates are recognised as connected but not always interchangeable. Alumni are recognised as constituting a wider body than those who may have graduated with degrees from an institution as alumni often encompass significant others such as former staff for example.

## Research Question and Objectives

The rationale has therefore framed the research question:

### **What do graduates perceive to be the value/s of their degrees?**

The objectives for this research are:

- Where do graduates perceive value or the lack of value within their degrees.
- What factors can be established as influencing or potentially influencing graduate perceptions of value within their university degree experience.
- How does distance (from the degree experience) or institutional group appear to influence perceptions of value among graduates
- How does value or lack of value articulated within graduate perceptions reflect or align with current HE policy
- How can this knowledge support higher education and those involved within it?

## Structure of the work

### **Chapter One - Value and Values in Higher Education**

This chapter provides background for readers who may not be familiar with the historical context to the ways in which the subjective concept of value is approached both individually and socially. It explores how higher education value has been previously perceived and researched.

### **Chapter Two - Hegemonic Discourse in and around Higher Education**

Through exploring literature this chapter seeks to chronicle changes in higher education, placing them in context of controlling influences. It provides the background to current thinking and the theoretical approaches which have led to the current situation.

### **Chapter Three – ‘Stakeholder’ voices surrounding 21st century Higher Education**

Perception of value is influenced by multiple stakeholders surrounding and within HE, and this chapter explores these, how they are heard and their impact on higher education policy and practice.

### **Chapter Four – Methodology and Resulting Method**

The methodological approach, epistemological basis for the study and underpinning theoretical context lies within this chapter. Primary methods and tools of data collection are detailed and explored for limitations as are the instruments of analysis.

### **Chapter Five – Research into graduate perceptions of value**

The research findings are presented here in two separate parts.

Phase 1 - Interviews

Phase 2 – Survey

These reflect the chronological structure of the research, identifying how the results of one phase informed the next.

## **Chapter Six – Evaluation of findings arising from research into the graduate voice**

The outcomes of the research and implications of the findings in relation to the research objectives are evaluated in Chapter Six. Models conceptualise the knowledge gained.

## **Chapter Seven – The graduate voice – the Missing Link of value to the HE community?**

In this final chapter I explore how the research has contributed to existing knowledge surrounding degree legacy and make recommendations for employing the graduate voice. Areas for further study are outlined with a personal reflection on my doctoral journey.



## Chapter One: Value and Values in Higher Education

This chapter provides background for readers who may not be familiar with the historical context to the ways in which the subjective concept of value is approached both individually and socially and how these relate to evaluating value in a higher education degree. It explores how values and value within higher education have developed and changed within the United Kingdom. Additionally I argue that value within higher education has for centuries been perceived as divided into a triad - personal, economic and academic. These three elements have been researched individually, often to make the case for higher education, its benefits or fee structure but there has to date been no research evaluating the balance of these three elements in the perception of graduates, those with lived experience. Existing research, as will be shown in this chapter, has tended to focus on one element or another without identifying whether this delineated approach of either economic or personal or academic is how graduates perceive value. Taking a segregated approach can, I contend, devalue the breadth of value perceived within higher education. This has the potential of leading some to consider that if they do not achieve or perceive a set outcome, generally economic as my research shows, then their time at university is considered lacking or devoid of value.

### 1.0 What is value?

Value and values, whilst related and indeed interdependent, are distinct entities. Value is the outcome of an evaluative judgment made by an individual or group, whereas values are standards, rules, norms or ideals which inform and are the basis for judgments of value. (Holbrook, 1995, 2015). Rescher's Introduction to Value Theory (1969) recognises value as a force, both carrot and stick, for individuals and society. Value is manifest in individual personal as well as social behaviour and benefits. In every definition value is recognised as complex, subjective and multi-faceted.

Values and the value systems upon which they are constructed, or which they construct, inform the actions of societies and individual members of societies (Weber, 1946; Durkheim, 1956) as Williams described:

*“Values, as standards (criteria) for establishing what should be regarded as desirable, provide the grounds for accepting or rejecting particular norms.”*  
(Williams, 1968:283).

Values, declared, believed, public and/or personal, are considered guides to both individual and collective decision-making, determining attitudes and subsequent behaviour (Feather, 2002; Rohan, 2000; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990).

Rokeach (1973) identified values as determinants of what we buy, how we live or work, what we are prepared to exchange in financial or emotional terms to realise our dreams. Thus he established values as motivators as well as drivers.

Friedman (1969) however, as an economist, identified values as determinants of economic actions, drivers motivating people to pay for one thing over another, an approach which can be clearly seen within the value discourse now commonplace in higher education institutions and which will be explored further in both this Chapter and Chapter Two. This value as worth or the ‘theory of utility’ is well known in marketing concepts (Day & Crask, 2000; Oliver, 1996; Woodruff, 1997).

Value and values can thus be seen to wield power through their ability to influence. It is not possible to have half a value, but it is possible to attribute more value to one thing than another, for example to value the pursuit of a degree over an apprenticeship. It is also possible to ascribe multiple dimensions of value to one thing, so to appreciate higher education for all or a combination of personal, economic, societal and individual values.

The moral or ethical judgements of value, whilst perhaps underpinning some of the central decisions made within societies and individuals regarding higher education, are outside the scope of this study. This thesis does not seek to be an exploration of philosophical axiology which Aristotle, Kant or Hartman (1967a, 1967b), determined as the science of values, their source or relativism as ethical and moral judgments which regulate and determine individual and thus societal values. Elements of axiology however will inform this work. Formal axiology recognises that values may be short lived or have enduring qualities, good and bad, ethical, instrumental (morality and competence for example), and encompass intrapersonal concepts such as peace of mind or personal

satisfaction just as much as the interpersonal such as a sense of belonging. An experience, such as that of undertaking prolonged study at a higher level, can be seen in different ways to combine all or some of these elements. The exact weighting will be individual, dependent on the values which the individual engaging with an experience places upon each and in what measure. The individual's prior values will come into play, either shaping or resulting in them being rejected during the experience, and this will affect the balance of the final perception of the value of the experience to that individual.

External influences too have capacity to sway individual perceptions of value. Hartman (1967a) highlighted cultural and family values to be powerful influences on values although it should be recognised that economics, time and changing circumstances are also powerful influencers. As an example, the perceived value of stay-at-home mothers has changed over time, being seen as once undesirable but now desirable, changes wrought by economics and emphasis on individual choice. Values can be seen to be continually in flux, shaped organically by individuals and the societies in which they live. Thus axiology provides a starting point from which to explore the values within our universities, edifices that Scott (2004:439) called the *"most value-laden institutions in modern societies."*

### **1.1 Theoretical constructs to identify and evaluate value**

Schwartz in his Value Theory (1992, 20) identified six main features of values common to the work of other theorists (Allport, 1961; Kluckhohn, 1951; Morris, 1956; Rokeach 1973). He determined that all values were emotive, linked to effect; all were motivators of active behaviours; formed standards or criteria; were hierarchical in nature, not locus specific and their importance was relative to each other in terms of importance.

With these common principles Schwartz identified 10 values: power, tradition, conformity, security, self-direction, benevolence, universalism, stimulation, hedonism, and achievement. Through employing a survey of basic human values Schwartz was able to evaluate and identify recurring values, individual and cultural, across populations by nationality, gender, political grouping etcetera, by participants' relative allocation of one area compared to another.

It might seem logical to consider employing Schwartz's values theory in this exploration of value perceived in higher education. However the bi-polar nature of values within the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS), and the way in which questions are phrased all requiring respondents to rate importance of 56 value items in relation to the phrase 'as a guiding principle in MY life', appear to inhibit the potential in many cases to draw boundaries between a degree value triad identified by previous research of economic, personal and academic (which is explored in Chapter 2) and the connected meanings. Recognising the balance and mapping these within each area of the triad would be extremely, if not overly, complex. For example power within the Schwartz survey is measured in terms of economic wealth and two items related to control over others. From personal experience I know some students enrolling in higher education seek control over their own opportunities and see a degree as a means to achieve that. In terms of economic wealth they may perceive value in terms of the choice of pathways a degree opens to them, although these may not increase or even lead to economic wealth. They may have achieved power, in terms of the power to meet their basic needs, but that may not be power as they perceived or sought from their degree.

Schwartz's survey, whilst widely used and extensively validated, has not been without critics for its methodology (Knoppen & Saris, 2009). It was however designed to identify cultural and moral values and thus does not appear ideally suited to achieve a broad perception of value in higher education against three specific and previously established areas of degree value – economic, academic and personal. However given the generic nature of values, it is recognised that in many of the responses arising from graduates determining value to themselves of their degrees, they will be reflecting some of the values or value groupings which were identified by Schwartz.

In their Theory of Consumption Values Sheth et al (1991) established taxonomy of the values consumers gain from products: functional, social, emotional, epistemic (contribution to variety seeking) and conditional. These are based on three underpinning tenets: that choice is recognised as a function of multiple values; that each consumption value differs, or the combination of them differs, depending on the underlying values at work; and thirdly that consumption values

are independent of each other. Stafford (1994) applied this taxonomy to cohorts of Masters' and undergraduate students to see how these consumerist values informed their choice of optional courses. He looked at the balance of these values drawing inferences from them as to the consumer choices certain groups of students would make.

The arguments within the sector about whether higher education should be seen as a commodity will be explored later in this chapter. However it is recognised that higher education has the capacity to offer those engaging with it, 'consuming' it, functional, social, emotional, epistemic and conditional value in differing amounts and scales. The multifaceted formation and evaluation of values leads to a determination, a judgement of value, which in turn can be either individual or collective, or in many cases both. However it will be subjective and subject to influence which may not always be based on rational fact, even if it is subject to the economic pressures of marketisation and competition.

Unlike Stafford's work this study does not seek to see how pre-existing values result in predictable behaviour, rather to determine whether and what values are actually perceived after engagement with a higher education degree, and whether those perceptions of value are influenced by distance from graduation. An additional reason for not utilising a method specifically framed around consumption was a concern that this might have led participants to adopt a consciously consumerist stance, considering the value of their degree on a narrow cost-exchange basis.

## **1.2 Specific values within higher education**

The complex nature of higher education in the duality of its role to self and society, teaching and research, freedom and increasing regulation has the potential to produce a complex mix of values perhaps even providing unique values which emerge from the operation of structures of power. However the very interlinked and complex nature of the multiple stakeholders involved in higher education, (Figure 1) can create limitations for application of axiological equations when considering the differing and sometimes competing values of those whose interests are enmeshed.

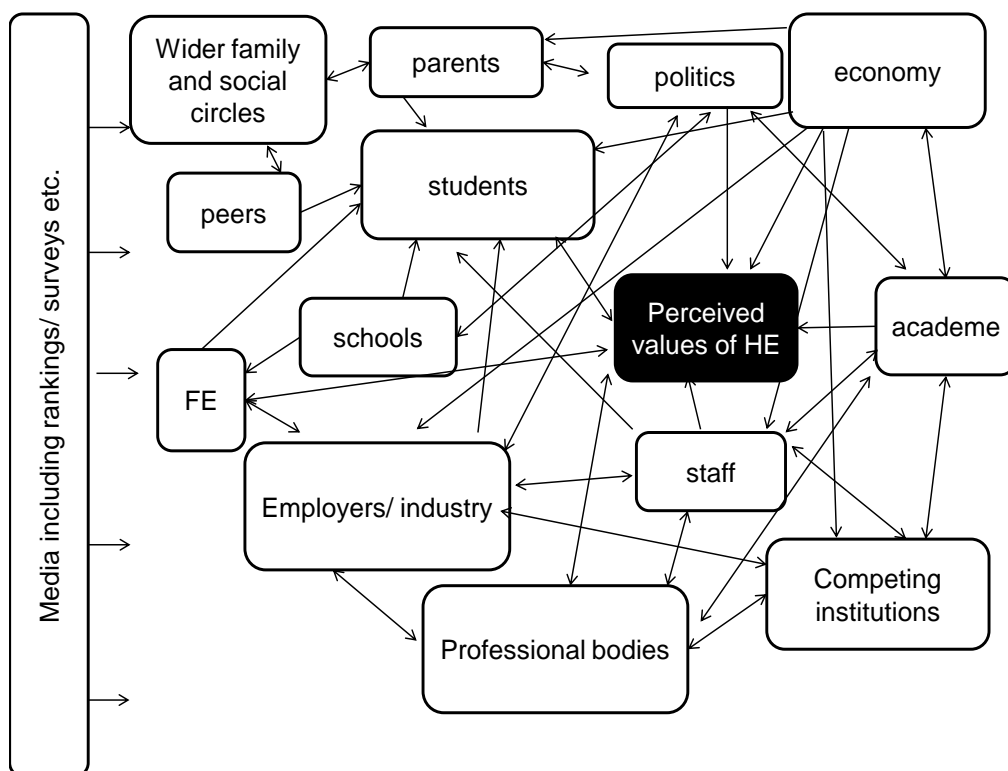


Fig. 1 Direct and indirect consumer pressures affecting Perceived Values of HE adapted from Ingham (2010).

As individuals, the formation of our personal values, the actions we take resulting from them and the judgments we make as a result of them rarely depends on a single influence. Multiple values, opinions, facts and perspectives shape the decisions we make, and the values we hold dear. Archer talked of ‘inner conversations’ of decision making, concluding:

*“It is we human beings who determine our personal identities in terms of what we care about. Therefore we are quintessentially evaluative beings.”*

(2000:318)

Weighing up pros and cons; positive and negative is a fundamental part of being human. The forces which sway us one way or another in our decision making, our attribution of values and value, are acknowledged. However I would argue that Archer’s declaration that human beings determine their own values and thus their identities is not as clear cut as she states. As will become clear in later chapters, my research indicates a more complex picture of individual determination being subject to both intrinsic and extrinsic pressures not explicitly articulated in Archer’s work.

Objects and experiences are regarded as having value, or as being valuable only because they are valued over other elements, often as part of a wider values system. Needs and time may change values and indeed the allocation of value priorities, as with the example of stay at home mothers, changed by feminism and economics. Equally something one person or one society regards as worthless will hold no value for them, but simultaneously may be of immense value to an individual or another society with different values (Allport et al, 1951; Allport, 1961; Jones & Gerard, 1967; Rokeach, 1973; Reich & Adcock, 1976). The role of values in developing cultural norms is fundamental to Schwartz's values theory but Morris (2014) counsels values should be recognised as catalysts rather than always as roots.

Values are not the only means toward meaning. Shared meaning is axiomatic in many theories of human culture. That is, humans can communicate and collaborate with in-group others because our shared mental representations create a common ground of meaning. (2014:16).

### 1.3 Allocation of value/s in higher education

The allocation of value is connected to both purpose and expectation. Higher education is an area where this is evident. Higher education is seen as the focus of the expectations of society, institutions and individuals. It is itself additionally a creator and developer of value and values. *"A degree always leaves its indelible price tag on the curriculum of its consumers."* declared Illich (1973:40).

Indeed Barnett (1990) identified how the value of higher education to the individual exists in the lasting impact it has upon that individual through ingesting the values of HE.

*"Cognitively it means that students will go on examining their own beliefs, thoughts, values and practices, and will make connections between those intellectual activities and their wider life and their general values. Out of that self-examination, other actions in their lives may follow."* (1990:120).

Since the medieval period, when seats of higher learning existed to develop the future leaders of religious and legal society, these institutions have sought to

promote their fundamental values. These values were grounded in the purpose of the institutions, the development of future generations, societies and economies, through teaching, learning and research. Veblen in his Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men alluded to this role in maintaining societal values:

*“In a general way, the place of the university in the culture of Christendom is still substantially the same as it has been from the beginning. Ideally, and in the popular apprehension, it is, as it has always been, a corporation for the cultivation and care of the community's highest aspirations and ideals.”*  
(1918:27).

The values, value and purpose of higher education are again sharply in focus today, perhaps even more so than ever before in the United Kingdom, following changes in funding since 1998, but particularly since 2011. It is apparent from media evaluation and discussions with participants during research for this study that the significant number of policy changes within the past 50 years have created an impression that the values and value of higher education are have been radically redefined and recalibrated by those both inside and outside institutions (Barnett, 1990).

My work recognises that higher education has both individual and collective impact in terms of value. Whilst focused on the individual perceptions of value determined by graduates, it recognises that for some graduates the contribution to society which their degree equips them to make may contribute to their own perception of degree value, and in this respect will have elements of both individual and collective value.

Dewey (1916) considered educational values to be those of utility, culture, information, preparation for social efficiency, mental discipline, power and he also recognised the value of study. Many of these values are reflected in contemporary views of education. Dewey saw education as a necessity of life, a social function, direction and growth for both individuals and society.

*“The term ‘value’ has two quite different meanings. On the one hand, it donates the attitude of prizing a thing, finding it worth while (stet) for its own sake, or intrinsically. This is a name for a full or complete experience. To*



*value in this sense is to appreciate. But to value also means a distinctively intellectual act – an operation of comparing and judging – to value.”*  
(1916[2004:269])

Within this work I seek to understand from graduates their perceptions of value in their degree experience and where they consider that value to lie. This different way of thinking about the degree experience from those who have already experienced it and moved from it, is a response to Ball's warning "*We need to struggle to think differently about education policy before it is too late.*" (2007:191). Whilst Ball was considering school education, his alert appears as relevant to higher education policy made by government and associated bodies as to the local policies affecting curricula made by individual institutions in maintaining the value of their degrees to their students. It seems at least surprising and at worst negligent that there is no current systematic evaluation and research conducted among all graduates at differing distances from their degree experience to determine if their degrees have lasting value. What those perceptions at a distance might be, how and who they might inform, will be addressed within my research.

#### 1.4 Commoditisation of value/s

The importance of value allocation and resulting commoditisation in terms of worth ascribed was recognised by Maslow (1943) in his hierarchy of needs. Something given more value over another thing can be thought of to be worth more to the individual who places it higher. Lower level basic needs such as safety needs, shelter, warmth, and food are quantifiable, and can be supplied by an external force. Listening to 21st century students in the UK making decisions about what they regard as a basic need enables some modernisation of the elements involved as they add internet connectivity, a mobile phone, laptops or tablets and often en-suite accommodation to more fundamental needs of feeling safe and secure in both living and learning environments.

Higher level needs of esteem and self-actualisation become more complex to quantify in terms of worth or external provision alone. They demand intrinsic development with, or in some cases without, external support or influence.

Maslow recognised the lower level values possessed exchange value, but precisely because the higher levels demand intrinsic input, their value is correspondingly higher, both to individuals and to society. Exchange value at any level accordingly to Maslow has an emotional dimension, as well as the capacity to be positive or negative; economic when aligned with worth, or emotional.

Jones and Gerard (1967) identified this exchange value as being simultaneously positive and negative, economic and emotional. This understanding of values and their complexity is particularly applicable to the higher education experience for the student learner given the multifaceted nature of higher education degrees today. Parts of the experience can be positive, others simultaneously negative, economic and emotional. However as a model for understanding values in HE, value exchange appears overly simplistic, centred on individuals and their responses, rather than considering the potential for breadth of influence and impact of higher level learning on society which may be valued in higher education.

Maslow's need hierarchy theory is also not without critics for its applicability in longitudinal studies (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). However its focus on the individual and its parallel to the progressive development within both the academic and personal aspects of an undergraduate degree in the incremental stages can be seen within the degree journey. The educational goal of higher education is to move students from an entry point where they are heavily supported demanding high external input to meet their needs academic, emotional and intellectual to a point at graduation where they are experiencing autonomous, self-actualizing behaviour arising from a developed internal capacity. This goal for UK higher education is articulated within the Quality Assurance Agency's expectations: Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking. (QAA 2012, Quality Code B3: p.8).

My work seeks to understand from graduates what each perceives they have individually developed and enhanced in value terms during their degree. Graduates in this study are individuals who have graduated from the institution/sector in question where they were students, as opposed to alumni who could be students who attended institutions from which they may or may not have graduated, or indeed staff who have worked for those institutions.

Maslow maintains an individual must recognise need in order to allocate value and indeed for the purpose of this study recognition and realisation will be an important factor. The timing of that recognition (of value) is also significant to this study. Within education, and particularly within higher level education, some elements of learning cannot be or are rarely valued at the time they are taught or learned, but only after the initial experience is complete, often considerably after completion, does their value become significant. Time, circumstance, application or requirement to demonstrate those skills or that knowledge can all prove catalysts to later recognition of value. Tulving puts value on distance from an experience thus:

*“Judgments about what is good and what is bad, what is worthwhile and what is a waste of talent, what is useful and what is less so, are judgments that seldom can be made in the present.” (1991:42).*

Accordingly, values and the value we attribute to them can differ from person to person, institution to institution, academic programme to academic programme. Evaluating commonality of individual value perceptions within institutions may identify that individuals with particular values are drawn to institutions whose values mirror their own, or that particular institutions add particular values to the individuals who study within them. Higher education has changed in the way it delivers its programmes, how students engage with their learning, the cost and terms of study, and all or any of these may impact upon the value perceived within the degrees which they award. Over time institutions and indeed the higher education sector has changed. This study seeks to identify from exploring the perceptions of value among individual graduates whether the value of higher education has synchronously changed.

It is important is to understand what value is developed within a degree, where those who have experienced higher education allocate or do not allocate value, and what, if any, lessons can be drawn from this graduate insight to enhance the sector, plus the experience of individual students within it.

### 1.5 Articulation of values by and within higher education

The majority of higher education institutions in the UK are aligned by choice into 'mission groups' self-formed on the basis of common interests and values. These institutions are diverse and different - but at the same time remarkably similar in the values they promote as individual entities within the HE sector.

All institutions actively promote their individual statements of mission and values. These are intended for diverse audiences including communities or employers, beneficiaries of applied research and/or future generations of students and society. What becomes apparent from these within the 185 UK institutions (Guardian's University Guide 2014) is not their diversity but their homogeneity. This may be the result of shared principles or 'academic drift' which Riesman described (1956) where lower status universities adopt the approaches of more prestigious colleagues. Alternatively it could just be that their markets and their audiences are the same, as Rhoades noted (2007:122) *'public research universities are mostly grazing in the same fields, feeding at the same waterhole.'* The apparent homogeneity may be precisely because they are seeking to attract hugely diverse and different audiences. Because their overarching mission statements are intended for multiple audiences in multiple cultural locations, published on websites and as such forming part of global marketing campaigns, they are forced to be broad-brush in their approach, portraying values that are not culturally exclusive. From their resulting similarity these statements can be viewed as one indicator of the values of the sector, whatever the mission group or the language used. As this work is predominantly researching English universities and their graduates, the focus is on these institutions.

The University of Cambridge, the highest UK ranked institution (Guardian University 2014, Complete University Guide 2014) declared simply:

*“The University’s core values are as follows: freedom of thought and expression, freedom from discrimination.”(2014).*

Newcastle University, in the Russell Group, declared openly that their statements aligned to the collective values of the sector:

*“There are certain fundamental values shared throughout the higher education sector to which we are committed, including: academic freedom; the pursuit of knowledge and understanding; a sound academic disciplinary base; a methodology based on reason and evidence; social responsibility; and transparency. In addition we are committed to excellence, value diversity, respond to societal challenges, accord parity of esteem to research and teaching, educate for life, are globally ambitious and regionally rooted, invest in excellent staff.” (2014)*

From the University Alliance, a different mission group, the University of Hertfordshire declared:

*“We aspire to be: Student-centred; Innovative, creative and enterprising; Committed to supporting and developing our people; Focused on excellence and its celebration; Dedicated to enjoyment in learning and work; A place of integrity where the individual is respected.” (2014)*

Whilst the core elements remain, the University of Bedfordshire’s declaration of values, incorporates the message of higher education as a vehicle for personal transformation:

*“The University of Bedfordshire's vision is of a world where all are able to benefit from transformational educational experiences.” (2015, online)*

The independent University of Buckingham frames its inherent values in an individual manner within a statement of ‘Classical Liberalism’, but these remain clearly aligned to the values of the sector.

*“The University was founded on the principles of Classical Liberalism, and has taught the ideals of free-thinking, liberal political thought, and maintained the independence of academia since we opened over thirty years ago.”(2014)*

These statements, whilst individually framed, have evident similarities, reflecting values which appear to some as fundamental to the ethos and approach of each institution and the sector as a whole. They can be seen to have individuality in phrasing and style, but in substance they appear fundamentally similar. To some though, however portrayed, the values of the sector contain little genuine substance – but should rather be seen as no more than marketing rhetoric. The very title of Sauntson and Morrish's chapter in Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon's *The Marketisation of Higher Education and The Student as Consumer* (2011) is a critical commentary on the proliferation of these institutional mission statements:

*"Vision, values and international excellence; the 'products' that university mission statements sell to students."*

They say the abundance of these statements and indeed the language in which they are phrased demonstrates increasing alignment of higher education with commerce; selling products or commodities. Whilst the mission statements encapsulate the academic business of higher education in terms of learning, teaching and research, by speaking the language of the marketplace their underlying text recognises the multi-billion pound global business which HE is today.

Prospective students and their parents, who have personal experience of the ubiquitous marketing-led Open Days, or HE academics required to engage in 'conversion' activities persuading prospective students to make up their minds in favour of their institution over another, will recognise the competitive marketing within today's higher education. These open days underline the reality that prospective students, each individually accompanied by thousands of pounds worth of tuition fees, are being wooed hard by institutions in differing ways, whilst at the same time subjected to the value judgments of academic tutors, parents, members of the wider family circle with views, opinions or experience; by their teachers; and sometimes by employers both existing or prospective (Fig.1, p.29). Today's prospective higher education student is enmeshed in a web of value systems and value judgments which appears far more complex than those of the past, and is subject to structured marketisation (Burns & Hayes, 2012).

In marketing literature and at Open Days the powerful influences created by introducing graduates in person or on film to attest to their positive, lived

experiences are often evident. These individual testimonies are generally carefully selected to promote particular aspects of an institution, a programme of study or a career trajectory. The alumnus too is subject to direct marketing with invitations to events, opportunities to be honoured guests of special weekends, and hierarchical 'membership' in some institutions based on various criteria, for example at Oxford University's Oriel College where those who make a bequest in their will to the College become automatic members of The Adam de Brome Society with a variety of privileges focused on their alma mater (Oriel College Development Trust, 2011).

The role of the alumnus and their recognition of values in their degree experience can thus be seen to be both important and powerful in higher education in terms of philanthropic giving and testimonial marketing.

Having invited past graduates to take part in Open Days, I am aware that the prospective student considering a university education is subject to considerable pressure. The views of some influencers will have greater impact upon their perceived values, either those already held or those adopted by a prospective student as a result of their Open Day. This is not always because of factual, economic or emotional weight, but because the capacity of some to influence economically or emotionally is greater. The academic professional, parents, existing or indeed the alumni as past learners within HE, regulators, employers, and society at large (identified within Fig. 1, p.13) inevitably have different viewpoints as a result of their individual or/and collective perspectives, motivations, goals and individual as well as collective backgrounds. Not all are informed about higher education, and within the quest to interpret educational value, it is important to recognise that there are players in the game of influence who are directly involved and those who are not.

The power balance of whose voice is heard, whose values are heard within and surrounding higher education is nothing new and will vary from individual to individual. The tension between individual (student, academic, graduate), and organisational (institutions, governments, employers) is regularly apparent in the often passionate tussle to make values heard in a bid to make sense of higher education in a changing environment. Whilst it regularly appears that managers

and academics, graduates and students, employers and politicians alike are all viewing higher education from their differing perspectives, it should be remembered that many of these groups are not only interrelated (many of them may indeed be graduates) but in some cases interchangeable in today's higher education where the linear approach of coming from school to higher education and then onto a career is over. In today's society higher education is more flexible, further qualifications are no longer seen as they once were as the exclusive domain of those wishing a career in academia. Therefore students may be employers, academics, graduates and possibly politicians simultaneously. People return to higher education at different times in their lives, and for differing reasons than career progression alone. As such their multiple perspectives may be even more intricate to untangle, which is another reason for seeking transparency of understanding – what do those who have experienced undergraduate degrees perceive as the academic value, the graduate value to themselves and how does this inform their judgment from their particular perspectives? The values they hold in one persona, such as that of a graduate, will influence their judgment related to HE in their other roles, whether as an employer, or parent for example. Indeed several studies have specifically explored the influence of parents and peers (Brooks, 2003, 2004, 2007) and social expectations on the educational choices and aspirations of students (Brooks & Everett, 2009; St. Clair et al, 2011). This work is informed by how these previous studies engaged with graduates, and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

## **1.6 Framing of HE value perceptions**

All those seeking to exert influence over values seek to harness the media in both its traditional and emerging forms to convey their opinions. The role and influence of the media has always existed, but the ways in which it is utilised by modern marketers and politicians in the 'values debate' has become more explicit and high profile in recent years. Within the 20th century, let alone the 21st century, Baudrillard articulated the importance of placing the role of the mass media in a particular context:



*“The media and the official news service are only there to maintain the illusion of an actuality, of the reality of the stakes, of the objectivity of facts.”*  
(1994:38).

The use of the word ‘illusion’ implies a lack of substance and indeed unsubstantiated media reporting can lead to significant ‘moral panics’ as identified by Cohen (1973). However it must be recognised that much media reporting is based on factual evidence, often stemming from government or academic reports, or researched evidence unearthed by journalists, such as that which led to the 2009 exposé in the Daily Telegraph of expenses irregularities and crimes by UK Members of Parliament. This indicates a cynicism within Baudrillard’s evaluation which can be seen to not always be accurate.

For audiences not in regular touch with higher education directly, the media conveys the values of the sector in terms of the sector’s value to society and the value to individuals who engage with HE.

Much of the value of higher education relayed in the media is the easily quantifiable, the economic. This approach has underpinned media coverage across many years as examples show (Boffey, 2011; Winch, 2013).

Value within HE has long been explored in two main ways: knowledge acquisition as extolled by Newman (1852), explored by Rodgers (2007) and evaluated by Liu (2008, 2009, 2011) and economic. The latter has been the most widely used, perhaps because it can not only be considered easier to quantify and is additionally the route to a politically expedient outcome. These two, though, are part of a triad of value elements apparent from research undertaken in this field to date. The three perceptions of value component elements are the economic/financial; academic; and personal. The ways in which previous research has established the value of each will be explored within this chapter, and within the research for this study. The three, as this research identifies (Chapter Five), are interlinked by those who have experienced them and their opportunities. Thus the graduate allocation of values within the triad elements may reflect a clearer overall perception of value than focusing on a single aspect.

## 1.7 The triad of established values

Accordingly each area of value within the triad is addressed, with how it has been previously researched.

### (a) Economic/financial value

In evaluation terms the economic or financial advantage of higher education both private and collective has been widely employed. Economic value of higher education subdivides into financial benefits (individual, corporate, public, national, international) and worth (again individual, corporate, public, national and international). The combination of financial benefits and worth has underpinned the 'graduate premium'.<sup>4</sup>

The advantage of a highly educated and skilled workforce to nations and individual companies has been recognised by economists, governments and organisations for centuries. Adam Smith (1776, 1.1.3) identified "*the skill, dexterity, and judgment*" of a workforce as a determinant of the wealth of nations. Investment in educating the workforce at a higher, managerial and leadership, level was seen as both a private and public investment which would repay in economic terms. In later centuries public investment in higher education or investment in '*human capital*' as it was sometimes called, was seen as one route to redistribution of wealth (Walsh, 1935; Mincer, 1958). In the United States of America this argument supported the policy of the federal government to only pay for higher education through funding military academies and some subsidies for poor students.

This economic evaluation of the value added to an individual through their engagement with higher education has been the subject of much research (Vaillancourt, 1986; Mallier & Rodgers, 1995; Rodgers, 2007; Caul, 1993). Caul, whilst calculating individual economic value, additionally articulated overarching value to society and individuals from higher education should be recognised in academic and personal terms as freedom for critical reflection, questioning

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<sup>4</sup> Graduate premium- the sum which a graduate can be expected to earn relative to a non-graduate

assumptions and opportunities for comprehensive personal development to foster strong democracies.

Lavoie and Finnie (1999) took a different approach in their Canadian study. Whilst looking at the economic value through the perspective of early graduates' employment and earnings, they did identify job satisfaction and use of graduate skills.

Alves' (2010) value-added index was focused on current students. Whilst grounded in the financial this went beyond the pure economic, being based on methodology of customer satisfaction indexes. Perceived value scores were estimated using a structural equation model allowing for the 'antecedents' of value (image and quality) and consequences (satisfaction and loyalty). Whilst taking a broader approach, this still appears a model insufficient to evaluate the entirety of the elements of an HE degree experience. The use of multiple models and multiple indices in a single study has the potential to add to confusion and possibly inaccurate interpretation.

The desire to quantify the value in higher education learning in simple return-for-investment terms has been the subject of warnings for its restrictive approach. *"Evaluation of the benefits of a university is primarily undertaken via graduate earnings and employment conditions. This has severe limitations."* (Milne, 1999:85). Milne identified that such an approach failed to recognise universities' roles as engines for growth within local, regional and national communities. From the individual's point of view and their immediate developmental capacity the economic evaluation is also criticised for its potential to devalue the impact of education as Gray warned:

*"For most people the value of learning is the value it gives to the quality of life – the individual's social and economic milieu. The learning by the individual enriches the life of the community and collective learning builds stronger cultural and working resourcefulness as each member of the community shares their learning. Learning individuals help to build learning groups and learning groups compose learning organisations and whole learning communities."* (1999:153).

However, the economic argument for attributing financial worth to establish value is one with which the sector has become familiar. It is though important to recognise that there is a differing value and potential for each individual student or graduate which is dependent on their values and experiences prior to, during and after their time at university.

Chapter 2 explores the hegemonic discussion surrounding higher education and its value. Whilst considering the broadly promoted perceptions of what the value of a university degree in the 21st century should be, it additionally recognises that this stems from rhetoric surrounding the economic value placed on undergraduate degree education by those who fund or create funding policy. In the case of the English university system in 2014 this is led by politicians, who hold many of the significant purse strings of or to HEI (Higher Education Institution) funding. Their determination to deliver recognition of that value in economic terms has had the most significant influence in recent years on publicly evaluating university education in stark economic terms alone. It should however be recognised that this is one of the most straightforward (if not most comprehensive) and is also potentially the cheapest method of evaluating the value of a degree.

Despite the current value for money debate this is no new argument. Economist J.M. Clark writing in August 1915 declared: '*The concept of value is the core of economic thinking...*' (1915:663). Alignment with Clark's economic concept of value, issued after the start of World War I, can be seen to underpin the political thinking that has resulted in significant changes to higher education funding within more recent times. This delivers implicit and explicit economic value judgments, particularly to students not previously exposed to HE values, those from widening participation backgrounds<sup>5</sup>. It results from employment of economic capital value judgment by successive governments of a 'graduate premium' (the pecuniary advantage of having a degree over not having one), combined with a suggested advantage in securing a first job, advancement on the career ladder and financial independence.

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<sup>5</sup> Widening participation: "a government-driven initiative to increase the number of students from under-represented groups participating in higher education. (Brunel University, 2009 <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/administration/access-and-widening-participation> accessed 26 October 2015)

Despite Clark's assertions, the value of higher education was at the time and for decades to come, seen by many, including politicians and economists, to be more complex than economic alone. The graduate premium is something Leslie and Brinkman highlighted as being both simple to evaluate and understand, but equally suffering from limitations in that very simplicity.

*"On average, one would expect higher earnings by those who attend college compared to those who do not, simply because the former are known to possess higher average ability and motivation. Also, the earnings differential identifies only benefits; it says nothing of costs."* (1988:41-42)

In America (the locus of Leslie and Brinkman's study) degree costs have escalated significantly and the value of the graduate premium or even the possibility of achieving a graduate job has diminished. Illich declared:

*"For the majority who primarily seek a college degree, the university has lost no prestige, but since 1968 it has visibly lost standing among its believers."* (1973:42)

Whilst numbers enrolling in American higher education have fallen since 2012 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2015) this drop in enrolment has not been reflected in England to date, despite tuition fees having trebled, indicating that here the gain may still be interpreted as worth the pain.

Before the introduction of annual £9,000 tuition fees in England, Callender and Jackson (2004) identified that the fee rises would have potential impact in deterring those from widening participation backgrounds, precisely those who governments sought to attract to higher education in an attempt to raise the social impact of tertiary education. Maringe et al (2009) in their research, published as the first £9,000-paying students enrolled at English universities, reflected a different, more philosophical approach encapsulated in the quote from a prospective student that formed the title of their paper *"I can survive on jam sandwiches for the next three years."* However in 2015 by the June 30 deadline (UCAS,2015) there was a rise of 2% in applications on the previous year to

673,040 seeking university places and OFFA<sup>6</sup> (2015) declared a 4% rise in those from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' achieving places. Accordingly the fee rise appears not to have reduced the UK numbers of prospective students to date although it may have stemmed the flood experienced in the rush to enrol in the year before the fee rise.

External influences have impact on student perceptions of the value of a degree to themselves and their future. These include media and statistical reports of fewer graduate jobs, and more lower paid jobs being offered to graduates. These have led to reductions in the graduate premium as reflected within government reports such as the BIS<sup>7</sup> 2015 Graduate Labour Market Statistics Report *"Graduate earnings have decreased from around 55% to 45% higher than non-graduate earnings between 2006 and 2015."* Reduced graduate premium combined with the increased costs of achieving a degree has the potential to make the alternatives to university education such as apprenticeships and heading straight into the workplace from school, look more attractive. The implications of this will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

### **(b) Academic value**

Since medieval times when seats of higher learning were seeking to develop the future leaders of religious and legal society, these institutions have promoted the fundamental values underpinning their degrees. The audience for these statements were often wealthy financial patrons seeking to support the development and furtherance of higher education for the greater good. Such declarations of knowledge acquisition as a fundamental value of higher education institutions have remained academic lodestones through the centuries. For many, the traditional values of higher education are fundamentally,

*"...rooted in being the knowledge core of society and an associated concern with truth and how to find and recognise it."*(Wilson 2005:73).

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<sup>6</sup> The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established under the Higher Education Act 2004 to promote and safeguard fair access to HE for low income and other under-represented groups following higher tuition fees.

<sup>7</sup> BIS - Department of Business Innovation and Skills.

In the 1850s John Henry Newman, later to become Cardinal Newman, was active in the development of the Catholic University of Ireland, forerunner of University College, Dublin. Whilst there as rector, Newman wrote his volume of lectures *The Idea of a University* in which he explored the purpose and values of a university. Newman attributed knowledge as one of the core values considering that the pursuit and achievement of knowledge a goal in itself for higher education scholars and institutions alike:

*“...I would maintain, and mean to show, that it is an object, in its own nature so really and undeniably good, as to be the compensation of a great deal of thought in the compassing, and a great deal of trouble in the attaining.”*

(1852: Discourse 5, 2)

This Knowledge (to which Newman accorded a capital letter acknowledging its importance as was the graphological style of the time) he saw as a central pillar of a university ‘*intellectual not moral*’ (1852). Indeed eight of the nine ‘discourses’ which form *The Idea of a University*, specifically detail his recognition of the importance of knowledge with titles such as:

*V. Knowledge: Its own end*

*VI. Knowledge viewed in relation to learning*

*VII. Knowledge viewed in relation to professional skill*

*VIII. Knowledge viewed in relation to religion*

Epistemological understanding was the axiological key according to Newman, with which to unlock the fundamental value of a university education. He understood knowledge was a commodity, one which was not always recognised or agreed in form, often not quantifiable, but he saw it as always desirable, and his views have been echoed and recognised by other academics through the generations. Ronald Barnett as recently as 2011 echoed the Newmanian belief of a single pillar of knowledge at the heart of a university. Barnett’s secular interpretation encompasses the professional and ivory tower universities which Newman recognised in his own day, whilst also incorporating today’s entrepreneurial, developmental and global institutional goals:

*Knowledge for itself*

*Knowledge in itself*

*Knowledge in the world*

*Knowledge for the world (2011:31)*

In some ways Barnett's perspective aligns with that of Habermas (1968) who identified three forms of knowledge acquisition. These he identified as: technical, which he saw being related to research and analysis; practical, which was evident in social interaction, communication skills and interdisciplinary learning; and emancipatory, which was concerned with both power and ideology. Habermas saw relevance and importance in the development of knowledge and skills, both within and around a specific discipline. He considered the interpretation of value of this learning was as individual as the students undertaking the study, and indeed considered tension would be evident arising between the academic tutor and the student, unless the teaching and learning of both was channelled towards the same or at least similar goals.

Barnett, whilst highly critical of Newman's 'value-laden' vision of a particular type of higher education institution took a more pragmatic stance on the purpose of a university in the 21st century. His evaluation placed HEIs<sup>8</sup> firmly in the role of global operators, identifying that their success and operation required more than recognition of national competitors and demands, as inclusion of the international dimension was fundamental. He saw a focus on the value added to an individual by their degree against a standard expectation as fundamental.

Academic value added to the individual is perceived within American universities to be an evaluation essential within higher education, for both fee paying and public funded individual contributory institutions. Assessment models utilised in US secondary schools (Steedle, 2012) are similar to those in British schools, but replicated into higher education. Liu, (2008, 2011) explored the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) a standardised test, comparing responses in writing and critical thinking between first and fourth years. Objections to these tests have been in enabling those subject to them to understand them, similar to those which have been raised about the English school system tests of value-added, identified via Standard Attainment Target (SATs) testing which currently takes place at the ages of 7, 11 and 14, the General Certificates of Secondary Education and Advanced Level examinations (Jankowski et al, 2012).

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<sup>8</sup> HEIs - higher education institutions



Value added is the measurement behind learning gain evaluative tests such as those used in U.S. higher education institutions: the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and the Measurement of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP). These general skills standardized tests have faced criticisms for their level of generalization and for their value as indicators, given that the requirement or level of general skills vary across disciplines for many reasons (Klein et al, 2007; Shermis, 2008; Banta & Pike, 2007; Banta, 2010). In England Oxford Brookes University brought in a system of performance and progress tracking (Academic Performance Tracking Tool - APTT) which after a 2012 pilot was rolled out for all undergraduates. Whilst still being evaluated, this tracker does not focus on generic skills alone but disciplinary progression through grades. Learning gain within English higher education became the subject of a £4 million pilot study commissioned by HEFCE<sup>9</sup> in September 2015 involving over 70 universities and colleges (HEFCE, 2015).

In one English university ranking scale (Guardian) value-added appears calculated thus:

*“The value-added score compares students’ individual degree results with their entry qualifications, to show how effective the teaching is. It is given as a rating out of 10.”* (Friedberg, 2014)

To achieve the calculation entry qualifications are based on type of qualification students enter with (plus grades only if possible), and the final classification within that group against a 1st/2:1 expectation. The suggestion that final classification is down to ‘how effective the teaching is’ fails to take into account myriad other factors including student engagement with and application to their studies. Those with higher entry points and requirements following more traditional routes are seen in the ranking to do better than those from non-traditional entry points.

Baruch et al (2003) approached postgraduate value in MBAs by comparing the human capital gained by these graduates against that of graduates from specialised business degrees. In their study capital was defined in multiple ways, all pre-defined by the researchers and employed with graduates from a single university which limited the study’s potential. They evaluated scholastic capital;

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<sup>9</sup> HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

social in terms of networking and contacts; cultural in terms of status (although it would appear this was more related to what Bourdieu (1979), termed symbolic capital), inner-value capital in terms of managerial competencies, market-value capital in economic premium and competencies.

Barnett, unlike many other analysts and academics, highlighted additional values of higher education as being fundamental and rarely explicitly researched, but which were within themselves of significant value to those taking degrees within the UK higher education system.

*“Hovering in the background is a value framework of truth, discovery, service, becoming, friendship, hospitality, care and solicitude, a value background that is seldom articulated or put to the test.” (2011:14)*

It is this entirety of values including these more elusive which this research argues require incorporation within evaluation if we are to establish a full picture of the value of a higher education degree today. These more elusive values are expressed regularly by graduates in conversations. They are elements which appear to be clearly not singly located within an economic or indeed an academic element but perhaps within the personal. However the value which each graduate or student may experience or have experienced is recognised as being as different as the way they choose to situate it, because perceived values are interpretations based on their individual experience, previous background, and pre-held values.

The need for recognition that the complexity of value and values emphasise that higher education is not, and never can be, the sum of a single element as encapsulated in Rothblatt's summary: *‘Human beings are not the sum of their examination scores.’* (2007:49). Thus a full evaluation of the value of higher education must go beyond the economic or academic alone.

### **(c) Personal value**

The potential for higher education to be a force for individual and public good through its capacity for personal development was clearly recognised in both of the UK's two most significant politically-instigated reports relating to the higher

education of the 20th century, those of Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997). In the same way that economic and academic value has implications for society and for individuals, so does the personal value although it is, by its very nature, more evidently and overtly discrete.

For some, like Bourdieu, the fullness of an experience and its full impact in personal terms, particularly in terms of cultural capital, is often unrecognised at the time of the experience and only understood later.

*“Cultural capital can be acquired, to a varying extent, depending on the period, the society, and the social class in the absence of any deliberate inculcation, and therefore quite unconsciously.”*(1986:248)

For many the personal power of education lies in, and/or stems from its individual transformative impact (Lange, 2004; Glisczinski, 2007; Taylor, 2008; Kear, 2013). Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996, 2000; Cranton, 1994, 1996) identified how adults particularly through higher education acquire experience in terms of learning which then frames or reframes the reference points by which they define their world and how they consciously act as a result. Mezirow argued that such experiences have the power to transform individuals' cultural, social, economic, political, psychological, and educational understanding, values and behaviour.

The transformation agenda comes with clear political overtones. Weber says revolutions in society come from the individuals within, and the changes they bring about, rather than from the relatively short-lived influences of policies, management and bureaucracy. ([1922] 1978:117).

Societies are thus transformed by the impact of individual transformation. *“There is little doubt that education has played a crucial role in transforming societies”* (Desjardins 2015:239). This transformational power of education (as reflected in the values of the University of Bedfordshire quoted on p.36 of this thesis) has echoes of Freire's work in the 1970s (2000) supporting liberation of Brazilian farm workers through education and consciousness raising (Durkheim, 1956) and the women's liberation movement in America in the same decade which recognised and demonstrated the development of consciousness and subsequent liberation

from suppression through education. Hirst and Peters identified this transformation as: *"It [education] often consists of putting people in the way of values of which they have never dreamt."* (1970:19). The experience of some graduate participants in this study whose comments appear in Chapter 5 also evidences this impact which they perceive as a personal value to themselves.

The concept of education as individual transformation at all levels from undergraduate to doctoral learning is recognised differently by individuals depending on their expectations and their own value systems. It is also the case that transformation is not guaranteed, not a fundamental for all students or indeed societies, and in this respect should not form the benchmark for an evaluation of value. Transformation and thus value perceived with and from it may take multiple forms. For some this realised in their introduction to, or acquisition of, human and/or social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

This personal aspect of value is fundamental to understanding some of the power within and of education for individuals. Habermas (1981) saw education as being instrumental in enabling individuals to control (or manipulate) their environment or others, normative in enabling individuals to understand the common values and norms of societal groups, and communicative so through education we understand meaning. Higher education by its nature supports a higher level development of these key skills and understanding.

Mezirow saw the power of education lying in its ability to transform an individual's frame of reference through a cyclical process of questioning and critical reflection. This brought about transformation according to Mezirow through multiple changes in points of view stemming from this critical thinking resulting in the rejection of pre-existing prior held beliefs, interpretations and habits (including the way we think or approach our processes of thinking). It can be seen that it is about a process and approach to thought as much as it is to the thought itself but the personal aspect to transformational experience in higher education for many is seen to go further. It is not just in the transformational learning but in how learning to be and view the world differently creates transformation during the process (Howard et al, 2007; Butcher & McDonald, 2007; Butcher & Egan, 2008). This is the impact which Dewey and others saw as having its power in the ability

to transform the thinking of others. It was a power articulated by former South African president Nelson Mandela. He declared education an imperative rather than an option for the development of post-apartheid South Africa:

*“There is no doubt in my mind that the single most important factor for the future of our country is education.”* (2003:speech)

Higher education, perhaps because of its immersive nature (required in thought if not always in person or in time), is traditionally connected with transformation in terms of personal development. However it was not exclusively within the classrooms and lecture halls (or perhaps even in the prison cells) that Mandela perceived the transformational impact of education taking place. He identified that whilst much of education is personal individual development, stemming from the classroom and academics within it, its value also lay in social contact, social lessons absorbed both consciously and subconsciously.

It has become apparent through researching this work that the individual interpretation of personal value is broad. It appears in the non-pecuniary advantages of developed networks and social interaction for some, though identity development is about more intrinsic development such as self-identity, self-confidence. Whilst these have impact upon economic capacity and academic achievement they are seen by many as valuable for their fundamental nature as catalysts.

### **1.8 Evaluating perceptions of value within these triadic elements**

Whilst specific studies have explored economic, academic and social aspects of degrees others have researched perceptions from wider perspectives (Lai et al, 2012; Moosmayer & Siems 2012).

With any experience, multiple individual perspectives arise from individual journeys even though all are on the same pathway. Specifically within higher education experiences, research with graduates for this work indicates that value can be seen to be as subjective as the experience of higher education. This means the evaluation by individuals of the experience will differ according to multiple factors, some within the control of the institution they attended such as

academic standards and inspiring lecturers, some within their own control, such as managing money, studying; external influences like locus of an institution, a conflict between gown and town also have roles to play, as do the prior experiences of the individual and their expectations. This does not make for a neat, straightforward evaluation. However, hindsight from differing perspectives and distances from the degree experience has the capacity to deliver a 360 degree picture to inform those considering embarking upon a degree. This is needed to fully understand and reflect the potential richness of the entire degree experience, both economic and esoteric. It is also necessary to enable the HE sector to fully understand the value individuals derive from their degrees, enabling those identified values to be maintained and enhanced. Therein lies the power of perceptions of value, in its ability to guide, to be judgmental and decision-influencing, if not decision-making.

The importance of recognizing and indeed understanding the diversity of value appears in Brewer's identification of the public value of social sciences (2013:135). Whilst this has parallels with the complex nature of HE, even his model appears insufficient when seeking to reflect the scope of value within, and resulting from, HE in terms of individual transformative value. Brewer recognises the interconnection of pleasure, personal, exchange and symbolism in value perception. He considers deconstruction can result in identification of usefulness, quality and evaluation on often simultaneously personal and public levels. The multiple value strands within a degree appear equally intertwined and finding a method to systematically portray this breadth may enable greater understanding about the value individuals derive from their degrees. This could add an additional explicit dimension to individual institutional understanding for transmission to prospective students. Currently the institutions and individuals ascribe and articulate value/s clearly demonstrates the impact of a variety of factors, especially political policy.

Brewer's model has particular relevance to the complex, polysemic work that is higher education (Figure 2). The complexity and multi-layered nature of allocation of public value appears to have particular resonance in light of the philosophical changes which have been seen most recently with the articulation

that students can be seen as paying ‘consumers’ or ‘customers’ of higher education.

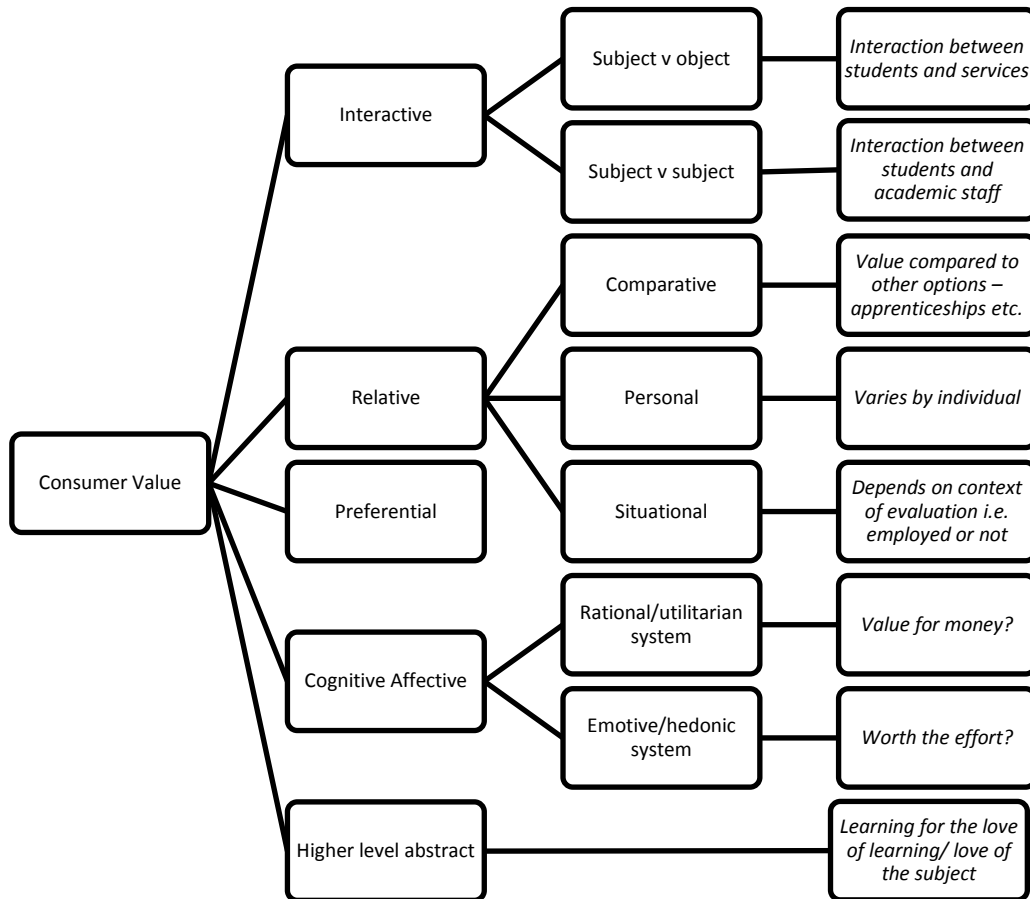


Fig. 2. Brewer’s model of public value within social sciences (2013) amended in italics to indicate application to higher education degree value. Adapted by Ingham.

As can be seen from my italicised additions to Brewer’s original model some elements could be easily applicable in evaluating the value of HE. However even this approach appears insufficient and potentially too prescriptive to secure an indication from graduates of the value they perceive within, and resulting from, higher education in terms of the academic, economic and personal values identified by previous researchers.

Ledden and Kalafatis (2010) evaluated the impact of time on perceptions of educational value, whilst recognising value itself as a subjective concept of quality. Distance (hindsight) delivers a potentially richer perspective, and indeed some studies have taken this into account, although for differing purposes than enabling prospective students to have a full picture of degree value, what it is, and what contributes to it. Part of the Futuretrack survey (Callender & Wilkinson, 2012) explored degree value from viewpoints of current and recent students, whilst Brooks and Everett (2009) drew on the perceptions of graduates in their mid-20s to evaluate the impact of their degrees on their future formal lifelong learning. Whether distance will demonstrate altered perceptions of value across the triad of economic, academic and personal value elements will be one focus of this work.

It is interesting to note the different lenses that have been applied to frame and indeed reframe value in higher education, but significantly a new approach has been growing fuelled by the change in approach subsequent to shifting sources of funding. We see growing references to the student as consumer (Woodall, Hiller & Reswick, 2014) and student satisfaction value (Shah & Nair, 2010). These make no specific reference to or acknowledgment of the effort and challenge arising from academic application as identified in Dewey's long recognised 'felt difficulty' (1910, revised 1933; 1916) with its resulting satisfaction of achievement and contribution to the public good arising from construction of meaning and learning through personal struggle, which appears to be identified by Newman and Robbins. The reality of the transformational, emotive and emotional impact implicit in many institutional graduate testimonials is rarely delivered in as clear cut or neatly packaged fashion as marketers, economists, researchers or politicians might wish.

The importance of evaluating which institutions, degrees and economic circumstances need to align in order for students to achieve the graduate premium, combined with understanding variable costs at different institutions, is important if equitable and fair value is to be attributed to a degree experience. If students are going to look to higher education realistically they should be able to access research to enable understanding of the entirety of the experience which



is on offer, and the potential it offers not just for the duration of their degree, or the six months afterwards, but over their lifetime.

### 1.9 Existing studies exploring multiple facets of value

Ledden et al (2011) explored how students as consumers perceive value in their studies through the lens of satisfaction. Drawing on Sheth et al's (1991) components of value they identified eight dimensions based on evaluation of service quality, leading to satisfaction endorsed by the desire to recommend. The study drew on the postgraduates who were continuing students asking them to respond to direct questions about value in their current experience. Their research is entirely quantitative and as such gives no indication as to the nature of students' decision making (i.e. why one area was valued over another by particular student groups).

Fine and Clark (2013) also explored satisfaction in alumni from one institution using questionnaires focused on four perceived areas of satisfaction, namely current employment status, skills, income and degree earned. This was an evaluation of satisfaction with the experience of a degree related to four specific areas.

Veronica McGivney was a researcher who identified in her work with adult learners the potential breadth and scope education can hold for transformation (2002). This recognition has wide value implications. In *A Question of Value: Achievement and Progression in Adult Learning* for the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education she sought individual learner identification and evaluation of the areas of perceived value arising from their engagement with education, which were academic, economic and clearly personal.

McGivney's work draws on some of the elements of Schwartz's Theory of Basic Values (1992) in order to achieve a flexible framework which has applicability to adult learning experiences and outcomes. The connections between McGivney's work and overarching values which appear within Schwartz's categories are particularly apparent in achievement, power, security and universalism.

This understanding of values and their complexity can be applied to the higher education experience for the student learner – parts of the experience can be simultaneously positive, others negative; they can be economic and emotional. The breadth and potential for participants to determine as well as articulate the individual values applicable to them through adapting McGivney's approach was the route adopted within this study. This was because it demanded flexibility to determine where the value in higher education lies today from the perceptions of graduates, those who have experienced it, in terms of how they allocate that value across the three dimensions of academic, personal and economic to themselves as individuals. For some this may lie in the capacity to recognise their role and transformation of that role within society, but for others that as a value will be less evident. The research does not seek to make judgments but to seek value allocation by individuals and to understand how graduate perceptions of the value of their own degree may change over time, and in turn to consider the potential application of this knowledge about their perception of value.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs has relevance to individual allocations of value. His hierarchy has parallels with an undergraduate degree, containing incremental stages moving from extrinsic influences to intrinsic. However within education and higher level education particularly, the need for some elements of learning cannot be valued at the time of being taught but only later, often considerably after the initial experience is complete, does their value become significant, given time, or circumstance, application or requirement to demonstrate those skills or that knowledge. Some of the value of higher education became apparent through a patina of age and applied experience as participants in this research identified (see Chapter 5).

Baudrillard (1983) argued that value is only ever produced symbolically, and the connection of symbolism within higher education has a different relevance to each individual, each nation, and each economy depending on needs, desires, budget and indeed aspirations. Indeed Baudrillard identified three forms of value – use, exchange and sign. At first glance sign-value appears less pragmatic and subject to the influences and interpretation of individuals and society. Closer inspection reveals all these values are subject to semiotic influence (Barthes, 1967). Someone with no knowledge of higher education would consider a degree

a degree and value it accordingly. Others may believe that a degree from a particularly 'prestigious' university holds higher symbolic value than one from a less prominent institution. Accordingly the "sign-value" of those degrees will be different, varying by the symbolism placed upon them by different people. Values by this definition, whether shared or not, will always be subject to interpretation and weighting of symbolism by individuals, groups or society as a whole. A value can be shared and perceived but the interpretation and assigned symbolisms one individual places upon it can vary from that placed by another individual due to background, culture, prior experience or other influencing factors.

Regular evaluation of value and reflection upon the experiences resulting in that value are now recognised as part of an individual and organisational professional cycle of practice (Dewey, 1933; Piaget, 1977; Schon, 1983; Kolb 1984; Gibbs, 1988; Rolfe, 2002). Universities utilise this process both for their staff individually and also institutionally through reflective review, which has become a fundamental part of most institutional quality process cycles. In this way it can be seen that higher education institutions are concerned with maintaining and indeed enhancing value and quality within their work with individuals and as institutions. Current students are given regular opportunities to feed back to their universities on a range of elements, academic to sport, social to facilities.

However what appears lacking from the current research and literature as well as from the institutional process cycles is an effective approach to evaluating the approach to describing the range of types of value that graduates perceive they acquired within and ascribe to their degree from their existing standpoint. The entirety is the key here but first it is important to determine the relevance of the individual elements which have been identified by previous research in this area as the cornerstones of the degree experience. Whilst each graduate will have a different perspective, and could be seen to have attended institutions which are constantly evolving, identifying whether the value perceived as being received from the degree experience endures or also changes is something which is not possible given the current lack of evaluation.

## Summary

This chapter has:

- Detailed definitions and interpretations of value and values
- Examined ways in which values and value are applied to and portrayed within higher education
- Identified three main elements of value (economic/financial, academic, personal) that form current research into perceptions of value in higher education
- Established a clear rationale for research into value from the graduate perspective to inform higher education and potential undergraduates

## Chapter Two: Hegemonic Discourse<sup>10</sup> in and around Higher Education

Higher Education globally and specifically within the United Kingdom has seen significant and rapid changes in recent decades. From purpose, evaluation of impact, student body and the policies (political and institutional) which drive its development little has remained unchanged. This chapter through exploring the literature seeks to chronicle changes within higher education, placing them in context of controlling influences. The impact of these changes on institutions, politicians, students and academics is explored; identifying that throughout the period of flux the explicit voice of the graduate and their particular perspective has been rarely heard. The chapter provides the background to current thinking and resulting theoretical approaches.

### 2.0 Shifting sands of power and expectation

Universities have been seen as fundamental to the knowledge and wealth generation of economies local, regional and national. From producing clerics, lawyers, medics and rulers in feudal societies, to providing an environment and facilities for high calibre academics to carry out high-impact research alongside educating students to produce the next generation of high-calibre graduate entrepreneurs higher education has had a significant role. (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Gray, 1999).

*“...[E]ducation outcomes comprise knowledge and skills and attitudes and values. Higher education therefore contributes both to national economic performance and to the promotion of core values, and thus has a significant cultural dimension.”* (Barr, 2012:300).

The pace of change in higher education in recent centuries has become nothing short of a ‘revolution’ (Altbach et al).

*“Arguably, the developments of the recent past are at least as dramatic as those in the 19th century when the research university evolved, first in Germany and then elsewhere, and fundamentally redesigned the nature of*

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<sup>10</sup> Hegemonic discourse is well described by Atherton (2013) as “one which has become so embedded in a culture that it appears silly to ask ‘Why?’”(online).

*the university worldwide. The academic changes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are more extensive in that they are truly global and affect many more institutions and populations.” (2009:3).*

The dramatic changes in society over the past century have been reflected in the microcosmic society of higher education (Collini, 2012). Whilst Marx argued that economic production shaped societies, it could be argued that the economic production of technology has changed and shaped societies through the introduction of new behaviours, demands, opportunities and expectations. Simultaneously the technological revolution has shaped the process and concept of production itself, resulting in new operational working practices that have in themselves changed society. Habermas (1991) and Baudrillard (1998) both argued that whilst production could shape society: society and its culture could shape production. In the postmodernist society the culture of consumer capitalism, rather than producer capitalism, can be considered to now hold sway. Giddens et al (1973; Giddens, 1991) saw Western societies as no longer anchored as they once were, or as he perceived the Eastern societies remained anchored by tradition, authority and institutions. Instead he saw the dominant forces in the West particularly as lifestyles and life politics.

Institutions too, according to Giddens, no longer anchor society and its expectations as they did. Technological advances particularly through communications and travel have made the world more interconnected and accessible. What were once regarded as national entities, bodies or institutions are now often required to operate in an international environment with different expectations, demands and costs that in turn have influenced their own policies and purpose. These changes on societies and their global interaction has had significant repercussions within individual citizens expectations and on the expectations of education, particularly higher education systems.

HEIs globally have reflected and been subject to this change, experiencing and embracing new demands and subject to new expectations. They have responded to policy changes of governments and decision making by individuals in ways that have had significant impact upon their purpose, their position and the ways

they operate. For some this has brought a change of identity and make up with transnational campuses, international education and greater mobility of students.

Foucault identified power as the dominant force in society *"Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but it comes from everywhere."* (1980:93). He saw this in the authority of the producer to influence policy, resources, and production as well as manipulating consumers through marketing and pricing strategies. In terms of higher education and funding strategies the producers could be seen as the politicians, creating consumers through tuition fees with the power of consumers and forcing HEIs as intermediaries to respond to the resulting pressures.

For Habermas however, university learners and educators working collaboratively was power – and the capacity to protect the system from what he saw as corrupting influences. Fleming's analysis of Habermas's work warned of the risks of an education system driven by market forces alone:

*"In university education the needs of the economy are strongly felt. The state sees education as a way of supporting the economy. But an education policy based solely on the needs of the market is deeply flawed."* (2010:120).

Knowledge, fundamental to higher education, is power and thus the production of that power has the potential to command value and thus a price. Equally, higher education is often seen as a life choice (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006; Pritchard & Roberts 2006), an individual and social aspiration bestowing status, again with the potential to command both a value and a price. It can be argued that today's higher education has become framed within and is continuously being framed as a commodity by this consumerist dialogue. In Chapter One Weber, Durkheim and Bourdieu's linking of symbolic and cultural capital of education to stratify and maintain hierarchies within society was outlined, although for some participants in this research (Chapter Five) HE was seen as a choice enabling them to break from existing hierarchies, to develop social mobility and independence.

Bauman (1990,1999) warned aspiration and achievement of goals would not necessarily result in individuals securing the status or entree they sought.

*“This finding shatters their trust in the free market as a guarantee of human freedom.” (1991: 212)*

Whilst education and indeed money can enable mobility, exclusion can still prevail resulting from birth, background or colour for example.

There are clear risks in assigning price tags to ambition, aspiration and more ephemeral drivers of human endeavour. However the blinding effect of price tags may be additional risks. The assumption that everything has a price can result in a failure to recognise value in that thing which cannot be assigned a price tag, perhaps because it is grounded in tradition, difficult to evaluate or only given its value by human engagement. These have value, which may vary depending on individual perceptions, but they may not have an allotted price.

Education whilst sometimes seen as divisive in terms of private/public has also been seen as a sociological, economic leveller. A cynical view of education's meritocracy (Young, 1958) is balanced by a system where achievement on ability can be recognised (Baker, 2011):

*“Over the relatively short sociological period of a century and one half, education is fully accepted worldwide as the one appropriate, legitimate playing-field on which to compete for merit.” (2011:27)*

This meritocratic aim was the ‘guiding principle’ within the Robbins Report (1963) featured later in this chapter, which sought access to higher education for *“all young persons qualified by ability and attainment” (1963:49)*

Therefore it could be considered that the individual through their own ability had the potential to change the power balance, altering their future and place in society. The power of the individual as consumer or potential consumer of education, public or private has been revised and strengthened in the UK public sphere over recent decades. This is evidenced in the way consumers are now actively encouraged to critique and challenge society's power elite of lawyers, doctors, clergy, police, and even celebrities, once considered unassailable. This change, this shift in power, was illustrated in the United Kingdom in 2012 by Operation Yew Tree, a police investigation into historical child sexual abuse committed by celebrities and figures of power which led to convictions. Whilst this



was a response by victims of crime to seek justice it had much wider implications. It saw a move by those who through their taxes were consumers of police services challenging previous police decisions thus holding them to account for their actions, a holding to account of individuals to moral values and expectations, a challenging of authority and celebrity, but also indicative of a shift of power within society. It may also be indicative of the increasing economic service industry building up around the consumer and their rights, which also affects universities as will be explored in this chapter. Thus a hegemony which led to these elites in society being unchallengeable has begun to be challenged demonstrating that hegemony is not always set in stone.

To understand and recognise the implications and changes in higher education it is important to see the sector in its historical context to understand how the hegemonic discourse arose.

## **2.1 Historical context for expectations of UK HE**

Universities as we saw in Chapter One were originally established to educate those destined for the state or church, with students often enjoying patronage from these bodies to support their studies. From 1096 there was teaching in Oxford, and by 1226 Cambridge had a group of 14-15 year-old scholars. Tutors were graduates approved in post by the collective body (*universitas*) of their peers. Thus higher education was established and perpetuated class hegemony. Centuries later Marx and his followers viewed this educational system as reproducing and justifying social inequalities (1977). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) saw it as a means to replicate class difference whilst Althusser (1971) saw a system which enabled successive generations to replicate inequality whilst claiming to be acting for the common good. For others higher education was seen as a route to upward social mobility (Newman, 1852; Robbins, 1963).

Universities as places for generally wealthy, male scholars or beneficiaries, continued for centuries. The original pre-requisites for entry were as much the capacity to pay as the capability to study.

However education was recognised globally as the route to prosperity. By the early 1900s Britain was trying to develop an educated workforce to compete with mainland Europe and the United States. In this the system's alumni<sup>11</sup> played key roles in influencing the hegemonic discourse identifying higher study as being both valuable and essential.

The Conservative government of Balfour (Trinity College, Cambridge) struggled to get their 1902 education bill through, in the face of objections from wealthy landowners and industrialist supporters, fearful that schooling would distract and divert their workforce. Balfour's argument was that this intransigence by employers would bring about their downfall as an uncompetitive, ignorant workforce would ultimately destroy their profits. In 1902 his bill became law, developing Local Education Authorities (LEAs), a system of secondary education, and creating more employment through a need for higher level teacher training (Benn & Chitty, 1996).

Shortly after the move to improve British education began, the human tragedy of the First World War took place. The National Archives record that 750,000 men died and nearly 1.5 million were injured. The financial cost was also immense, and curtailed Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George's (no university education but an articulated lawyer) ambitious social plans to create a land 'fit for heroes'. He saw investing in education as vital to rebuild Britain. His Liberal-Conservative coalition's 1918 Education Act raised the school leaving age to 14 but post-war austerity curtailed their ambitions. They did though create the Universities Grants Committee to administer central government funding to universities.

Severe financial hardship, starvation and strikes dogged Britain's inter-war years but there was some education reform from Churchill's (Royal Military College, Sandhurst) coalition government. Written against a backdrop of bombs Educational Reconstruction (HMSO 1944) formed the basis of Education Minister Rab Butler's (Pembroke College, Cambridge) Education Act of 1944. Its opening *"Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of this country*

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<sup>11</sup> The higher education background of each policy leader is identified in italics and bracketed after their names.

*depends*” (HMSO, 1944) set the scene for the significant expansion of secondary education, which in turn fuelled demand for university places. The Percy Report in 1945 (National Archives) recommended making some technical colleges into universities. But in the decade after the Second World War the expansion of secondary education was producing university-level students with nowhere to go, as university development was slow, restrained by a scholarship system unable to support all with aspiration (McCulloch, 1994).

To address this imbalance the Anderson Report on Grants to Students recommended a new system, accepted in 1962 (Anderson, 2006). Every full-time first degree student became eligible for a grant covering tuition fees and also a means-tested maintenance grant providing educational mobility for many. It came into effect through MacMillan’s (Balliol College, Oxford) Conservative Government’s 1962 Education Act when these grants became the responsibility of Local Education Authorities (LEAs). At the same time another Committee was called under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins which was to bring in even more significant changes.

## 2.2 Higher Education from the Robbins era

The dual public/individual nature and value of higher education was recognised in the two most significant reports relating to HE in the 20th century those of Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997). In the context of identifying potential areas of impact and influence of graduate voice, Robbins was a graduate of University College London and the London School of Economics, whilst Dearing was a graduate of the University of Hull.

The Robbins Report laid the foundations for dramatic expansion of UK higher education, based on meritocracy. In the words of Claus Moser (London School of Economics) who led the report’s research team: “*This was progressive - it changed the whole university world in the direction of expansion.*” (Gibney, 2013). It tasked HE with advancing knowledge and learning through combining teaching and research, to provide a national workforce of skilled and educated citizens. It aimed for 10 per cent (and hoped for 15 per cent) of young people, both men and women, to achieve degrees.

The report to Douglas-Home's (Christ Church, Oxford) Conservative government, concluded:

*"...the system should provide for those who had the qualifications and the willingness to pursue higher education; that it should ensure equal academic awards for equal performance; that it should eliminate artificial differences of status and recognise hierarchy in so far as it was based on function and attainment..." (1963:265)*

Within months The Robbins Report changed the size and shape of higher education. More places, indeed more institutions (National Archives Cabinet Papers), were required for the anticipated 390,000 new students expected before 1973-74. As student numbers grew so did the number of institutions to accommodate them. By 2005 there were 168 HEIs in the UK. The student population changed significantly too. By 1996 there were more female than male undergraduates and in the academic year 2003/4 the number of first-year students in publicly-funded HE rose to over a million.

Not everyone was convinced this dramatic expansion radically threatened the exclusivity of higher education or indeed that it would achieve what it was setting out to do. Goldthorpe's *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain* (1980) was based on data collected in 1972. He concluded from his evaluation of interviews with working men that policies and investment to drive social mobility in various ways including through higher education had had limited relative impact, although education was seen as a key enabler:

*"... [T]he dominant theme is not that of the growth of incomes or consumption but rather the growth of opportunity. For our upwardly mobile respondents, the differences between themselves and their fathers are primarily attributable to the 'chances' which they had and which their fathers were denied." (1980: 232).*

Robbins advised that higher education should focus on more than academic programmes, that its purpose should also be to deliver advanced learning, skills for employment, promote general powers of the mind, and transmit a common culture and common standards of citizenship.

Historically the payment of tuition fees in Great Britain reflects less direction from philosophical or political will as from being tugged along by the purse strings. Whilst perhaps not what Prime Minister Wilson (Jesus College, Oxford), was thinking of in his frustrated comment: *"Whichever party is in office, the Treasury is in power"* (no date) it is apt in this situation. Wilson's two Governments were recorded (McKie & Cook, 1972) as having allocated more money to education (primary to tertiary), than to defence for the first time in British history.

Wilson's legacy to higher education played and continues to play a significant role in widening access. His Open University, originally the University of the Air, (Perry, 1976) was a model of social democracy in action, designed to provide universally accessible higher education and he also continued the creation of new universities, in line with Robbins' recommendations.

Wilson himself benefited from widening participation policies in higher education funded by a scholarship, 'exhibition' or bursary. This numerically-limited route, was historically known as patronage, and not only continues but has seen resurgence. The payment of tuition fees by employers like McDonald's fast-food chain and the supermarket Tesco funding degrees at Manchester Metropolitan University (2010) are examples of contemporary patronage in higher education for employees of subscribing companies.

However in the 1970s a debate began about the sustainability of the existing model and its capacity to support not only the state but higher education itself. Labour Prime Minister Callaghan's Ruskin College speech (1976) can be considered a turning point for its public questioning of the nature and role of public education. It can be recognised as a brave speech considering the power at the time of the trades unions within Britain, and Ruskin College's mission to the union movement which put many convenors and officers in his audience. However it was a public declaration of the opening of a debate and inclusion of trades unions within that debate. The speech encompassed the idea and role of social engineering within higher education particularly. Callaghan (no university experience) queried why graduates were staying in academia or joining the civil service rather than moving into industry. He asked why 30,000 science and

engineering student places remained empty whilst humanities courses were overflowing with candidates.

But the crux of the speech in hindsight lies within Callaghan's public declaration that it was necessary to raise standards without increasing expenditure:

*"In today's world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for those without skill.... There is a challenge to us all in these days and a challenge in education is to examine its priorities and to secure as high efficiency as possible by the skilful use of existing resources."* (1976, speech).

This call for an increase in social mobility based on meritocracy, improved education for the workforce and achieving this without draining the public purse remains a challenge for higher education and governments to this day.

### 2.3 Economic framing of purpose and framing of economic purpose

Perception of what the value of a university degree education should be today stems from the decisions and demands about economic value from those who fund or create HE funding policy. From the time Callaghan's speech put the cost-benefit exchange on the table to today, demand to deliver recognition of value in economic terms to governments, individuals and society at large has had significant influence framing university education in either cost-benefits or graduate premiums.

Tuition fee rises for all have appeared in three leaps and stem partly from moves in HE institutional funding. 'The Baker Act' (Education Reform Act 1988) brought in Kenneth Baker (Magdalen College, Oxford) under Thatcher's (Somerville College, Oxford) Conservative premiership, removed power from the LEAs and set up two new central HE funding bodies. But Mrs Thatcher's final Education Act of 26 April 1990 was one of the most significant for higher education students - the Education (Student Loans) Act 1990 (HMSO) introduced 'top-up' loans for tuition fees. This positioned the individualisation of higher education, the shift to it being seen a private rather than a public good, and thus with it a change in funding from state to the individual, personal beneficiary.

The increasing pressures that brought about the desire to significantly expand higher education resulted in legislative changes from governments of all political persuasions. These have led to increased contributions from and financial pressure upon students and graduates, as well as a change in the role of the state from provider to monitor and consumer in the HE equation (Figure 3).

### Key points in HE degree funding

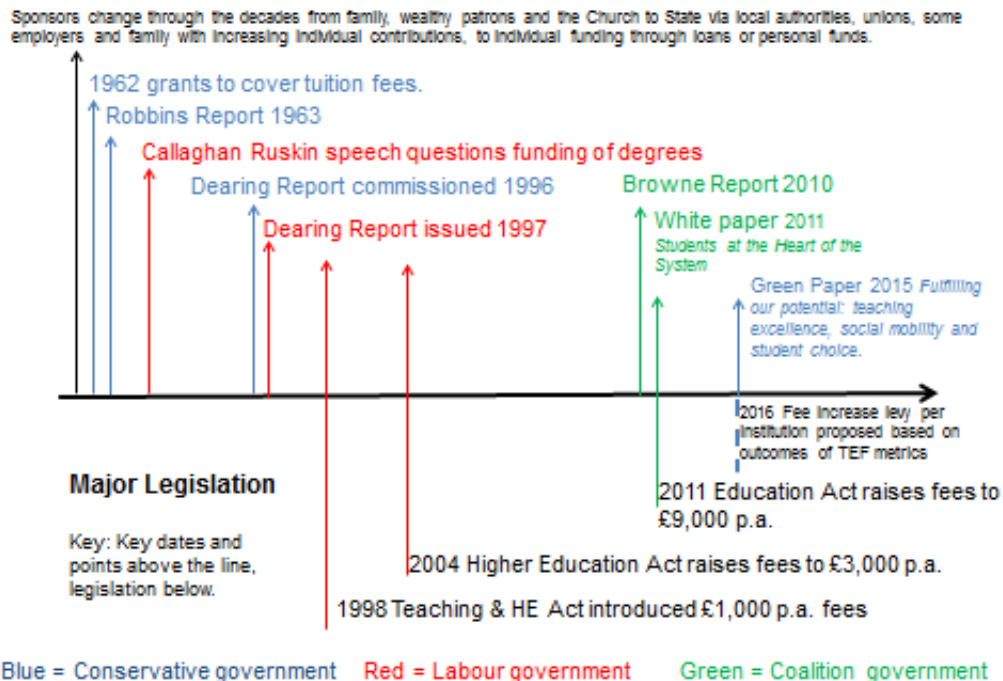


Fig.3 Review of political and funding landscape of Higher Education in England (Ingham).

Thatcher's successor, John Major (no university experience) further changed HE funding via the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, establishing the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Brought in by Kenneth Clark (Trinity College, Oxford) HEFCE was seen by some as subject to quango-funding and control through a privatised market (Benn and Chitty 1996).

Within four years Major commissioned Dearing (University of Hull) to lead an inquiry on how HE funding in Britain should develop over the next 20 years. Dearing's report echoed and expanded the principles and goals of Robbins' 1963 investigation.

Dearing's National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education recognised the contributors to Higher education were society as a whole, taxpayers, institutions, Higher Education staff, employers, students' families and students and graduates themselves. Students were seen as contributing in two ways: firstly through greater financial contribution to tuition and living costs (especially for those from richer backgrounds) and secondly through time and effort applied to learning. Among the benefits Dearing listed for students were more internationally recognised opportunities for education and employment, better part-time study support, chances to pay back loans when in work and larger access-to-education funds.

Introducing students' financial contributions, Dearing emphasised the breadth of purpose of HE, echoing Robbins in part, saying the sector should:

*"sustain a culture which demands disciplined thinking, encourages curiosity, challenges existing ideas and generates new ones; [and] be part of the conscience of a democratic society, founded on respect for the rights of the individual and the responsibilities of the individual to society as a whole."* (1997: paragraph 1.4)

But soon Dearing had adopted an economic-value-to-the-individual rather than society argument:

*"We have concluded that those with higher education qualifications are the main beneficiaries, through improved employment prospects and pay. As a consequence, we suggest that graduates in work should make a greater contribution to the costs of higher education in future."* (1997: paragraph 90).

Dearing proposed graduates should make a flat rate income-linked contribution of 25 per cent once employed but this was not adopted. Some (Anderson 2006) have interpreted Dearing's explanation that higher education should be seen as individually beneficial, as a shift to seeing students as consumers. When Blair's (St John's College, Oxford) new Labour government, under his first Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett (University of Sheffield) responded to the Report, their reaction focused largely on the financial implications of fees and grants.



Despite having been elected on a May manifesto of maintenance only being repaid on an income-related basis by graduates, in July Blunkett told MPs:

*“Students should share both the investment and the advantages gained from higher education: rights and responsibilities go hand in hand. The investment of the nation must be balanced by the commitment of the individual: each will gain from the investment made. Graduates gain considerably from higher education. Compared with non-graduates, graduates see their earnings rise on average by as much as £4,000 for every £20,000 of earnings.”* (Hansard 23 July 1997).

Sure enough, when the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 (HMSO) was published on 16 July, Labour announced means-tested maximum tuition fees would start in September 1998. Some universities welcomed the chance to let the market dictate the financial value of their degrees. However significant dissent about the introduction of student fees among the ranks of new Labour was muffled by simultaneous concerns about the first Cabinet reshuffle, and mounting disquiet about rumours of weapons of mass destruction (wmd) being developed in Iraq.

Despite political rebellion, students paid their first tuition fees with a means-tested maximum of £1,000 from September 1998 a level of contribution which remained until January 2003.

When campaigning for his second election victory Blair put higher education aspirations at the heart of the Labour Party election manifesto setting an ambitious target for HE participation.

*“We believe there is no greater ambition for Britain than to see a steadily rising proportion gain the huge benefits of a university education as school standards rise, meeting our goal of 50% of young adults progressing to higher education by 2010.”* (23 May 2001, speech).

Floud (2014) claims the target arose from a Confederation of British Industry (CBI) prediction of demand for graduates but whatever its origin the ambitious goal was set, and required funding without draining State coffers.

Accordingly two years later Charles Clarke (King's College, Cambridge), then Secretary of State for Education and Skills published a White Paper proposing universities could set their own tuition fees up to an annual capped limited of £3,000. He told the House of Commons this would enable institutions to raise funds they desperately needed and develop

*"...a better contractual relationship with people who are coming to them."*(Hansard, 2003).

In the Queen's Speech for the State Opening of Parliament on 26 November 2003 the tuition fees were announced, alongside the introduction of OFFA (the Office for Fair Access. *"A bill will be introduced to enable more young people to benefit from higher education."* The speech pledged the move would put Universities on a *'sound footing.'* (2003, online).

Unfolding drama surrounding weapons of mass destruction and military action in Iraq became more closely intertwined with the fate of higher education students in January 2004. Lord Hutton's judicial inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of scientist and biological warfare expert Dr David Kelly reported on 28 January 2004 but on 27 January, the very day MPs were due to vote in the House of Commons on variable tuition fees, the Inquiry report was leaked in The Sun newspaper amid a distracting media furore.

The tuition fee debate and vote went ahead, with New Labour making concessions including all student debt being wiped out after 25 years and a full-scale independent review of the fees system after three years. Whether these concessions won over rebels; the drama surrounding evidence and action in Iraq distracted opposition; or party concerns prevailed about the need to support a shaky Cabinet and Prime Minister, the White Paper was carried by just 5 votes with 19 Labour MPs abstaining and 71 voting against.

The resulting Higher Education Act 2004 brought in by HE Minister Bill Rammell (University of Wales, Cardiff) on 1 July introduced variable tuition fees for full-time

home students from 2006-07 of up to £3,000 a year. During 2009-10 inflation increased this to £3,225 a year.<sup>12</sup>

Just three years later the Browne Report and its subsequent White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (2011) calculated the cost of tuition at £6,100 per annum and announced institutions should be permitted to raise tuition fees under a cap of £9,000. Students incurred loans to be repaid at a rate of 9 per cent once they earned over £21,000 as graduates.

Browne (Cambridge, St John's College) acknowledged that in the half century since Robbins' Report, demand for higher education in Britain rose from 400,000 full and part-time students in the early 1960s (Greenaway & Haynes 2003), to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data showing 2,005,840 enrolments in 2008-09 for England alone.

The emphasis on higher education as economic exchange backed by the 'graduate premium' reappeared within the Browne Report. The graduate premium calculation appeared fundamental in justifying the trebling of individual tuition fee contributions to enable government funding to be withdrawn (Barr, 2001). The government-funded Walker and Zhu (2013) research showed graduates could earn up to £252,000 more in their lifetime than an equivalent non-graduate colleague. This cost-benefit could be seen to be additionally framing the approach of HEIs themselves in "*What's the value of a UK degree?*" a report, commissioned by university think tank million+ and produced by them with private research firm London Economics. Although produced by an organisation representing 17 post-1992 universities whose institutional values declare transformative education and emotional personal benefits lie at the heart of their operation, the focus of the report echoed the dominant political message estimating economic benefits of degree-level study to individuals, the Exchequer, exports and 'spillovers' (defined as "situations in which the activities of a graduate impact positively or negatively upon other individuals within the economy".) Unsurprisingly the conclusion of the report was

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Rammell later became the Vice Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire in 2012 after Professor Les Ebdon moved to become the first Director of OFFA, the Office for Fair Access

*“...a UK degree remains an exceptionally good investment for both the individual undertaking the qualification, as well as the Treasury funding their provision – and therefore, by default, the taxpayer.” (2013:16)*

So when institutions were required, as the coalition Government's Spending Review took hold, to finance the shortfall in their teaching funding from HEFCE, the Government announced

*“From autumn 2012, all higher education institutions will be able to charge a basic threshold of £6,000 a year for undergraduate courses. The maximum charge will be £9,000 a year.” (Students at the Heart of the System. 2011:.9)*

Of England's then 123 universities and university colleges, by 12 July 2011, 48 had declared they were intending to charge the full £9,000 fee. In December 2011 OFFA announced that 36 of these institutions had revised their tuition fee levels resulting in some reducing all their courses, and others reducing fees across the board.

When making judgements based on value, and perhaps given the economic arguments now explicit throughout higher education, there is a need to establish a 'value background.' As defined by Taylor (1969) this is a standard against which it is possible to determine authenticity of claims.

The Browne report did recognise the multi-dimensional value to society as well as to the individual of HE:

*“A degree is of benefit both to the holder, through higher levels of social contribution and higher lifetime earnings, and to the nation, through higher economic growth rates and the improved health of society.” (2010:2).*

Browne went further than Dearing, saying students needed additional information, to be best placed to make 'an informed choice' about what they wanted from higher education. This echoed Morley:

*“The student voice is not that of the empowered citizen or social change agent, but that of the discerning consumer.” (2007:122).*

The resulting need to produce information in accessible cost-effective formats, led to the 2012 development of the Key Information Sets (KIS)<sup>13</sup> provided for prospective students by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which came alongside a system to recognise teaching standards in HE (UKPSF)<sup>14</sup>. Both were intended as tools for students and the sector, though comparisons become meaningless unless what is being compared is fully understood.

It is interesting that the Browne Report details no explicit account of consultation with graduate perceptions although engaging with “...*written and oral evidence drawn from students, teachers, academics, employers and regulators.*”(2010:2). Many could be graduates, but their perspective is not articulated as such, nor is it clear if postgraduates were consulted as former graduates and/or current postgraduate students.

When tuition fees were trebled to a maximum £9,000 p.a. for home entrants starting in 2012/13, financial value was employed to frame the UK degree experience. Kandiko and Mawer’s research with students demonstrated this changed expectations,

*“The overwhelming majority of value discussions centred on pecuniary value and were framed by the issue of tuition fees” (2013:22).*

What McArthur (2011) deplored as ‘employability’ value for money could be seen as indicating acceptance of the economic theory of neo-liberalism. Tomlinson summed it up thus:

*“The notion of employability has become a central pillar in the economisation of higher education, and indeed central to human capital-orientated policies. At its crudest level, it represents an overall pre-*

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<sup>13</sup> Key Information Sets contain information about each institution where available as follows: 9 responses drawn from the National Student Survey covering teaching and learning, resources and the Students’ Union; information from institutional data about contact hours, assessment methods across courses, professional recognition and accommodation costs, financial support and average fees; data from the DLHE survey regarding employment six months after graduation. Introduced in 2012 they are available for prospective students via the Unistats website, which is funded and owned jointly by HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Scottish Funding Council and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland. KIS are expected to be centrally removed under the Teaching Excellence Framework proposals but are likely to be maintained by individual institutions as comparative marketing vehicles.

<sup>14</sup> UKPSF – United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework benchmarking teaching and learning development standards in HE administered by the Higher Education Academy.

*occupation with preparing graduates for the labour market and better attuning them to its demands. But it has become higher education's defining purpose, eclipsing other potential benefits such as enhanced citizenship and cognitive enrichment.” (2013:125).*

The move of power to the consumer in higher education led to the government not only being a regulator but also a consumer of education by purchase (through the Research Excellence Framework [REF] and funding), and to what some would now see as regulators operating checks and balances on the spending and efficiency of the system.

## 2.4 The impact of neo-liberalism

Some might see the move from higher education being employed to develop and sustain economic regeneration to it becoming a drain on that very regeneration which then threatened stability and sustainability. It was perhaps recognition that the policies which drove higher and higher numbers to university were victims of their own success. However the changes were compounded by the policies resulting from neo-liberalism, an ideological shift not confined to the United Kingdom.

McChesney termed neo-liberalism,

*“...the defining political economic paradigm of our time.” (1998:7)*

whilst Harvey defines it:

*“...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework, appropriate to such practices.” (2005:2)*

Neo-liberalism emerged from globalisation, a macro-level theory that shaped and influenced economic and in its turn educational policies. Neo-liberalism was embraced in the UK by the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcherism, whilst not the spawning ground of neo-liberalism became aligned to its approach

to place the individual rather than society at the heart of policies by emphasis on free markets, influenced by those individuals, placing individual responsibility and individual opportunity at the heart of policies. Thatcher summed up her philosophical perspective in an interview with Women's Own magazine:

*"There is no such thing as society. There is living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate."* (Keay, 1987 online).

Thatcher's governments brought in policies which changed the face of British society. Privatisation, free trade policies and deregulation saw the role of trades unions significantly reduced, share ownership escalated, efficiency savings and profit margins became familiar. Inflation plummeted from 25% in 1976 and interest rates in the United Kingdom fell to 5.12% during her premiership. By the time Thatcher resigned in November 1990 significant changes had been evidenced. Unemployment had risen rapidly, peaking at three million in 1983 and the UK workforce had begun a transition from production to service.

The neo-liberal effect had a powerful impact on higher education in the United Kingdom and indeed across the globe. Jordan et al (1994:212) talked of neo-liberalism transforming education into an "oligarchic" good; whilst Kweik (2001) said in reality globalisation meant today's universities were no longer elements of their nation states and cultural identities, but multi-purpose, multi-product entities. Ozga and Lingard (2007) identified a homogenising impact of this race for economic competition alongside the move from elite to mass higher education. The impact on a meso-level of neo-liberalism, with its individual-as-consumer approach and positioning of the state as regulator rather than provider, has been significant. As higher education funding moved from state coffers to individual loans (which in turn become commodities) the UK, Sweden, Australia and South Africa along with the United States of America have all sought cost-sharing or cost-shifting policies to move funding of undergraduate education from the public to the personal purse (Chapman & Sinning, 2011). This in turn created conflict at the micro (or institutional) level as universities attempted to meet both the

resulting audit culture and market competition of neo-liberalism, whilst upholding principles of academic freedom and attainment of universal knowledge.

In higher education employees are subject to the neo-liberalist impacts identified by Ball (2015) of rankings, metrics, National Student Survey (NSS)<sup>15</sup> tables and student fees. On a more personal level I am subject to the impacts of neo-liberalism such as individual performance development reviews, performance-related pay, peer review and other such metrics. As an academic developer my entire role might be considered by some to be framed by neo-liberal policies, driven by metrics such as the NSS, the KIS, and student fees. As a parent and taxpayer HE costs me too. Undertaking doctoral study as a part time student working full time in higher education adds an additional duality perspective. Because of who I am, what I do and where I work, I am both observer and participant. I am a fee paying student with all the expectations that role creates whilst on the other hand a deliverer of education to fee paying students with the pressures that in turn demands.

It could be said that the move from State-funded higher education to a free market approach with limited support for those unable to personally fund their degrees is purely economic. However the shift created by neo-liberalism moving funding and responsibilities from the State to the individual may contain echoes of developing education for the sake of the wider social good under the principle 'a rising tide lifts all boats.'

*"Neoliberal theory holds that the elimination of poverty both domestically and worldwide can best be secured through free markets and free trade."*

(Harvey 2005:64).

Neo-liberalist narrowing of expectations resulted in an alert from Kelly and McNicoll (2011). They concluded that underestimating and insufficiently recognising the public social value of HE institutions could lead to them being devalued through ignorance,

*"The risk is that if public resource decisions for higher education are made on the basis of inadequate evidence – and insufficient understanding of the*

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<sup>15</sup> NSS National Student Survey has since 2005 gathered final year undergraduate students' opinions on the quality of their courses. It is run by Ipsos Mori on behalf of all universities and results are analysed/published by HEFCE.



*often invisible economic and social value being generated by higher education – society may not actually get what it really wants from higher education.” (2011:50).*

On the other side of the Atlantic, the President of Yale University declared that the survival of higher education depended on making a case for public support:

*“To us the case seems obvious; we take for granted that there is no more important investment in the future of our nation. But elected officials, and many of our fellow citizens, do not share our experience and do not necessarily share our conclusions.” (Levin, 2011).*

Within months Roger Brown, former Chief Executive of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) called for the UK to heed the lessons emerging from America regarding the ‘marketisation’ of HE (2011). He warned that when students and employers had limited information about the product or service they were committing to or engaging with, and subsequently the value they perceived within it, there was potential for ill-informed judgments.

Indeed Sandel observed:

*“We live at a time when almost everything can be bought and sold. Over the past three decades, markets - and market values - have come to govern our lives as never before.”(2012: 5)*

For this reason, if no other, the persuasiveness of the graduate premium argument which might have held good in 1997 has been dented if not demolished by the recessions of 2000 and 2012.

Higher education sought to protest against the neo-liberal policies they considered threatened their fundamental values and to uphold the importance of institutional independence from political interference, as echoed in the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988) of fundamental principles signed by 776 Universities from 81 countries.

The changes wrought by the impact of neo-liberalist policies also led to the largest number of voices from inside HE institutions in the UK raised in protest as hundreds of academics objected to the 2011 White Paper that followed the Browne Report. Their ‘In Defence of Public Higher Education’ declared:

*“Public higher education is not state-controlled higher education, but publicly-funded higher education that respects these principles and secures other public benefits appropriate to a democratic society.”(Multiple, 2011).*

The uncomfortable interlinking of social democracy and neo-liberalism through free markets and individual opportunities was signified in the UK's active encouragement of wider social participation through HE access agreements and establishment of the Office for Fair Access. Institutions in all mission groups were regulated and required to allocate economic support for lower income students during the transition from Treasury to individual funding. This widening access provision has become another competition ground for some institutions.

Neo-liberalism has been recorded by some as being ideology in practice (Kitschelt, 1999). Others considered it a destabilisation resulting from a doxa (an unquestionable orthodoxy which operates as if it were an objective truth, Bourdieu, 2003). The word neo-liberalism itself has changed as connotations of the impact of its resulting policies in the United States, Chile and the United Kingdom have been evaluated, and as political emphases have changed. From the literature it is evident that the neo-liberalism of the 1970s and 80s resulted in neo-liberal policies being demanded of individuals and institutions, which in turn had impact on the purpose, expectations and operation of higher education today.

Higher education has moved in policy terms from demonstrating social democracy which was the approach of the immediate post-war era to a neo-liberalist approach where everything has its price. The free market holds sway and the government's role has accordingly shifted from provider to monitor. The student has moved accordingly from having a responsibility to improve the society which invested in their education, to being owed a graduate job by that society, a job which they have paid to secure.

Change has been global, reflected in rhetoric from multiple sources the World Bank declared a university should be seen as a multiproduct firm which produced instruction, research, socialization, certification and other social functions (1994). However, it should be recognised that changes were being wrought by economic

imperatives stemming from free market pressures during this time, even in political spheres not adopting neo-liberal approaches.

The idea of social engineering within higher education raised by Callaghan at Ruskin College was at the heart of the French government's attempt in 1986 to use HE to reduce unemployment. Rancière recalled the outbreak of a 'quite puzzling student strike' against proposed government legislation on the universities. The basic aim of this legislation was to make higher education more responsive to economic requirements. One graduate in three, they said, was unemployed. Hence the need arose to introduce a 'selective orientation' which would set students on the 'right path' and match their abilities with eventual employment. (2006). Resulting protests were against the reduction in individual choice and imposition by the State in terms of what students could study.

In later work Rancière recognised his nation was in the grip of a "new sociology of narcissistic consumerism" and was considering democracy no longer to be about community but about individual consumerism. (2007).

Scott (1995) identified that higher education funding has been influenced by the blurring of boundaries between private and public sector, and reflected changes in the welfare state. In the 50 years between Robbins and Browne, the HE sector had been relocated from the Department of Education to its current home within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. This is perhaps indicative that the cultural capital, value and/or purpose of higher education had changed in the minds of successive governments.

The cultural move from aspiration to expectation created issues of how the costs of these expectations should be met. If a degree was regarded as beneficial to society, should society not pay tuition fees with the individual investing time and effort? This is clearly the principle still adopted by some albeit limited numbers of employers recognising the collective value by funding degrees for their staff. Alternatively, if the value is to the individual alone: is it not right that the individual should contribute not only their effort, but also a share of their resultant income. Is there a danger that the financing itself creates expectations that could potentially overshadow the recognition of the individual effort required?

Tappan's view of cost/benefit analysis within education appears as valid today,  
*"We have cheapened education – we have reduced it to cost – we have put it below cost – we have even given it away."* (Rudolph, 1962:63)

The paradox of value as Adam Smith identified it is that value and cost are unequal.

*"The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. Nothing is more useful than water: but it will purchase scarcely anything; scarcely anything can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarcely any use-value; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it."* (1776: 1.4.13).

Indeed such was the tide that when Thatcherism came to an end there was no turning back. Changes were in situ within families, new service industries, monitoring and managerial strata (Goldthorpe, 1987; Clark & Newman, 1997) were in place and New Labour were too heavily influenced by the neo-liberalist role of the free market to turn the tide. Thus the rhetoric remained of the individual as consumer and the state as regulator rather than provider.

Regulation became essential, a means by which data could be collated and provided for the consumer to ensure standard expectational thresholds of quality. The consumer of higher education armed with this information could evaluate which institutions, which degrees and which economic circumstances needed to align for them as students to achieve the graduate premium combined with understanding variable costs at different institutions. Data collated from existing metrics and other sources by HEFCE formed the online KIS for students, their families and schools. The data comes from the NSS, Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey, course fees, accommodation costs, and details from academic information are now required to be collated and published about methods of teaching and types of assessment within courses. Whilst any move to transparency of information is generally seen as positive, the need to understand the subtexts, in order to effectively compare the value to a specific individual of one institution over another, is likely to be difficult to achieve with a homogenised

set of statistical analyses alone. The full cost in economic terms may become apparent, so prospective students can see how much accommodation at institution A will cost against institution B, how long the course will be, whether professional bodies value the course, and perhaps some idea of emotional impact by seeing how much of their assessment will be coursework and how much exams. The entirety of the student experience is not and cannot be captured in the KIS although it has raised the profile of student choice and the need for information. The significant student engagement work which has been developed and which is impacting on the university experience of many students is also unlikely to be captured in this way (Buckley, 2012).

The process of monitoring in order to maintain standards as well as inform consumers has had additional impacts in terms of the courses in higher education. The market and the way the market monitors and judges through the metrics in place have had an impact on the types of provision and delivery within higher education. Courses which fail to recruit large numbers have in many institutions been cut, and existing provision refocused on employability and transferable skills. It can be argued that it is inevitable in a sector seeking to maintain currency of practice and value through relevance. Browne saw the metrics as a way of reflecting this relevance and the individual approach of courses and institutions to study as a way of informing students of exactly what they would face.

However it could be argued that if students are going to look to higher education and evaluate its potential realistically, they need a way of understanding the reality of the entirety of the experience in academic, personal and economic terms and to understand what this could offer them not just for their duration of degree, or the six months afterwards, but over their lifetime.

## **2.5 Resultant framing of HE**

Dewey, Newman and indeed the Robbins Report made clear the recognised breadth of HE. The latter identified four expectations of the sector in the 1960s as:

- development of specific skills for future employment (a vocational goal explicit since Newman's day when lawyers, medics and clergy were university-educated);
- cultivating critical thinking;
- research to advance learning
- *'the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship.'* (1963:7)

Whilst this may be seen as recognising breadth it is also a clear setting of expectations, a declaration of purpose of higher education.

Comparison with the declared purpose of higher education as identified within the Browne Report is clearly indicative of the changes and shift in expectation and accompanying policies. The Report (addressing Higher Education in England alone, Scotland and Wales taking different approaches) establishes a fundamental outline of the national purpose of and for higher education:

*"A strong higher education system is an important element in the economy and culture of a leading nation. Higher education matters. It helps to create the knowledge, skills and values that underpin a civilised society. Higher education institutions (HEIs) generate and diffuse ideas, safeguard knowledge, catalyse innovation, inspire creativity, enliven culture, stimulate regional economies and strengthen civil society."* (2010:10)

The individual benefits and through the education of the individual economic benefits in terms of income generation and lower drain on public services are clearly identified:

*"Higher education matters because it transforms the lives of individuals. On graduating graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next. Participating in higher education enables individuals from low income backgrounds and then their families to enter higher status jobs and increase their earnings. Graduates enjoy substantial health benefits – a reduced likelihood of smoking, and lower incidence of obesity and depression. They are less likely to be involved in crime, more likely to be actively engaged with their children's education and more likely to be active in their communities."* (2010:14)

The Report returns to highlight another economic purpose of higher education:

*“Higher education matters because it drives innovation and economic transformation. Higher education helps to produce economic growth, which in turn contributes to national prosperity.” (2010:14)*

It might be expected that a report which was about to turn the system of funding higher education on its head would by its very nature be required to produce a strong rationale for the economic argument for the individual to recognise the worth, the value to themselves. Browne’s ‘stick’ of increased personal cost was offset by high expectations for higher education in the minds of many with significant ‘carrots’ (although qualified with the phrase ‘most likely’) of higher wages, employment mobility, job satisfaction, better health, enhanced community and family benefits.

Thus it could be seen that policy wrought not only a change in the role of students but also a change in the students themselves. More from non-traditional backgrounds, and more women were drawn to higher education. In 2012 Mary Curnock-Cook (UCAS Chief Executive) said the statistics showing a gender imbalance indicating that women were a third more likely to enter HE than men were to even apply, was ‘*a striking and worrying finding.*’ (2012).

In the same year Alex Bols then Assistant Director (Research) and Head of Higher Education at the National Union of Students’ commented in a response to Gwen van der Velden’s (2012) *Whose education is it anyway?* paper for the Quality Assurance Agency:

*“Not everyone in education wants educating. As much as we may hate to admit this fact, with increasing numbers of people going to university so the purpose of higher education changes and the reasons why people go become more diverse. NUS/HSBC research (2008-11) shows more students citing instrumental reasons for going to university, whether to get a job, become more employable or even just to get a qualification. This is not to say that they don’t receive the benefits of higher education, but that we can’t simply rely on the same assumptions about their expectations and what they want to get out of university.” (2012: online).*

This raises the question as to whether this student instrumentalism results from or is the driver for hegemonic rhetoric surrounding the purpose and thus informing the perceptions of value within higher education.

## 2.6 Impact of policy changes

Doubts have been voiced inside and outside the HE sector since those early introductions of tuition fees as to whether students were about to be charged what was a fair amount for what they could expect. In 2003 the Office of Fair Trading was warning universities against price-fixing top fees of £3,000; by 2010 the then President of the National Union of Students, Aaron Porter was quoted in numerous national newspapers saying that whilst he had no evidence of price-fixing with the £9,000 fee, *“if I did I would report it to the Office of Fair Trading.”* (Baker, 2010). Three years later the issue raised its head again, (Griffiths, 2014) as newspapers reported a preliminary report into cartel practices in HE had been prepared by the OFT for release.

However Williams highlights the trebling of fees as something more than balancing the books, but a calculated shift to change the nature of higher education.

*“Instead of being treated as a public service, higher education is now explicitly recognised as an activity that primarily benefits private individuals. The role of the state is restricted to quality regulation and the purchase of services where there is clear likelihood of market failure...”* (2012:54)

Research and ensuring opportunities for students without personal funding through higher education were the only two areas he identified where government remained as a provider.

The overt ‘education for education’s sake and for society at large’ approach appears subsumed in the development of higher education as a multibillion pound business. Newman from his perspective within a sector limited, constrained and largely elitist talked of a university education developing lifelong attributes of freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom. He recognised that a university education was as individual to those undertaking it as, and because of, their backgrounds, aspirations, application and engagement,



as much as the need to produce a universal threshold to enable universities, whatever their offering of disciplines, to deliver a minimum standard enabling those outside to recognise the scope of the value of what had been achieved within their walls. He saw this had potential to add value to the world beyond. Higher education in the 21st century appears to be endeavouring to maintain its historical core values, making them available to an increasing student base whilst taking on the mantle of business in efficiencies. The resulting dominant emphasis being economic purpose and application of that knowledge from politicians, stakeholders and subsequently from students too will be discussed in Chapter Three.

## 2.7 Hegemonic discourse and the framing of value

Thus over the centuries arose a hegemonic discourse which placed economic and financial value at the heart of the higher education system. Accordingly, almost without question, much of the hegemonic dialogue surrounding higher education today stems from the individual value/worth/benefit in terms of financial gain via graduate earnings and employment for financial outlay. This may have been deliberate, according with developing policies to encourage people towards higher education, or it may have been by chance in some instances where it was felt that everyone recognised a wider perspective. However this economic/financial focus as Gray (1999:85) indicated has “severe limitations.” Not only does it totally fail to consider benefits to society from wealth generation, higher intellectual capital and economic growth but also devalues the potential value of a degree to the individual to a financial exchange. Gramsci (1971) highlighted the hegemonic discourse by which a ruling elite maintained power through political force and civil consent with ideas replicated by a media owned by the elite. Gramsci considered challenging the hegemony was rare, but as we can see from the media, and from changes in the perceptions of society hegemony does get challenged, and this I believe is what has been and is being seen in HE.

In the complex environment of higher education particularly, it is seen as limiting to equate value with pure financial benefit, when this is now not always an expected or if expected, cannot be a guaranteed outcome for all students (Bell

and Stevenson 2006; Monteils 2004). This finding was borne out by Futuretrack (Callender & Wilkinson, 2012) a longitudinal research study exploring the relationship between HE, employment and career planning.

Evaluating and declaring academic value is perceived as essential within American universities for both fee paying and public funded individual contributory institutions. Assessment models utilised in their secondary schools (Steedle, 2012) are similar to those in British schools, but replicated into higher education. Liu, (2011) explored the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) a standardised test comparing responses in writing and critical thinking between first and fourth (final) year undergraduates. Critics have highlighted the structure of the tests and complain about a lack of data transparency, narrowness of the outcomes sought, accuracy and how the findings are used to rank institutions. The assumption that information must be comparable across similar institutions to facilitate student choice may or may not have advanced comparability, but it clearly appears to have limited the richness of information that might have been of potential use to students and the public. (Jankowski et al, 2012)

The criticisms directed at the VSA about over simplistic evaluation, a lack of data transparency and accuracy as well as about the ways in which the findings are used to rank institutions are similar to the objections raised to the English Key Information Sets (KIS).

Rankings and statements of value arising from degrees are nothing new however, and certainly not confined to modern times. From medieval times statements of value were made by institutions often to the audience of financial patrons seeking to support the development and furtherance of higher education for the greater good (or their own prestige). Such declarations of the values of the institutions have remained academic lodestones through the centuries. In the 1850s Newman saw the value of a university education being as individual to those undertaking it as their backgrounds, aspirations, application and engagement. The diversity of today's HE participants under the widening participation agenda could make this even more relevant today. Newman saw a need to produce universal thresholds enabling universities to deliver minimum standards that would allow outsiders to recognise the value of what had been

achieved within – to which the policy now seeks to add equity through benchmarking and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)

The academic attainment approach to determining value exists within UK school and US and Australian HE systems. Periodic testing, with analysis of progress between set points is recognised as having shortcomings but pragmatically as necessary (Hill et al, 2005; Rodgers, 2007; Coates, 2010; Boudarbat et al, 2010). This cannot though account for untested areas like extra-curricular experiences which may still have provided significant value to students in a variety of ways.

The graduate premium during the run-up to increasing tuition fees was clearly the dominant theme in discourse surrounding the value of a degree among those in charge of the policies.

Bill Rammell (University of Wales, Cardiff) as the Labour Secretary of State for Education and Skills told the House of Commons in 2006:

*“...the average premium would still remain comfortably over £100,000 across the lifetime of a graduate, in today's valuation, compared with a similar individual with 2+ A levels.*

*Serious academics agree that the earnings benefit to a degree remains substantial, and OECD data shows that the UK has one of the highest rates of return to higher education investment by international standards.”*

(Hansard 2006, 9 January)

Four years later David Willetts (Christ Church, Oxford) the Conservative Minister of State for Universities and Science was telling the House:

*“These estimates indicate that first degree graduates can expect to earn, on average, over £100,000 more over their working life, in today's values and net of taxes, than similar individuals who stop their education with two or more A-levels.”* (Hansard 2010, 25 November)

However in his first speech as Conservative Minister for Universities and Science Jo Johnson (Balliol College, Oxford) revealed a different picture.

*“Between 2006 and 2015, the graduate earnings premium decreased from around 55% higher to around 45% higher than the earnings of non-graduates.”* (Speech: 1 July 2015).

An independent body identified the average starting salary for a graduate was £22,000p.a. with some earning only £16,900 (Complete University Guide, 2015). This is in sharp contrast to the salaries highlighted by politicians as being commanded by those who have eschewed direct university entry for apprenticeships (although some of these are being linked to degrees). Transport Minister Lord Ahmad (London South Bank) announcing the Government's commitment to train 3 million apprentices by 2020 revealed that a cement sprayer in the UK was achieving a basic salary of £80,000p.a. (Speech 21 October 2015). His speech equated the economic value of apprenticeships to a degree, emphasising the human and symbolic capital of both being equally valuable and empowering.

With decreased economic/financial value combined with increased costs of up to £27,000 for a three year degree, a greater political emphasis has begun to emerge to higher education delivering 'value for money' for both students and taxpayers.

Johnson introduced the outline of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) as a way to monitor the teaching which students were receiving for their tuition fees. His roadmap for the TEF included monitoring teaching quality, giving teaching equal recognition as research and ensuring widening participation, the latter being a commitment of his Prime Minister (Cameron- Brasenose College, Oxford). The TEF is being developed at the time of writing but initial expectations were clear:

*"I expect the TEF to include a clear set of outcome-focused criteria and metrics. This should be underpinned by an external assessment process undertaken by an independent quality body from within the existing landscape."* (1 July 2015)

It must be acknowledged that the widely promoted perception of what the value of a university degree in the 21st century should be stems from increased rhetoric about the economic value placed on undergraduate degree education by those who fund or create funding policy. In the case of the English university system this is led by politicians, who hold many of the significant purse strings of HEI

funding. Their determination to deliver recognition of that value in economic terms (graduate premium, value for money) has had the most significant influence in recent years on publicly evaluating university education in stark economics alone. However, it should be recognised that this is one of the most straightforward if not fully accurate methods of evaluating the value of a degree.

It should also be recognised that policy and the discourse surrounding it is not just the result of decisions made based on rational fact or indeed economic necessity. Decisions and policies are indeed further influenced by personalities and motives, both individual and collective and these apply equally to politicians and civil servants as they do to academics and academic managers, many of whom will be graduates. Alan Clark (Christ Church, Oxford), a Junior Minister in the governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major put his version of reality succinctly:

*“It is an awkward thing to say, other than to those you can trust, but policies are neither determined nor evolved on a simple assessment of National, or even Party, interest. Personal motives – ambition, mischief making, a view to public obligations and opportunities in the future, sometimes raw vindictiveness – all come into it.” (1993:64).*

## 2.8 Impact of creating paying consumer students

The shift of power to the consumer in terms of higher education led governments to become not only regulators, but also in some cases consumers of education by purchase (through the REF and funding). Policy changes created a need for regulators operating checks and balances on the spending and efficiency of the system to meet politically set targets.

From being institutions of status and standing, from the 1980s HEIs found themselves in the dock with questions about their purpose, their role in a changing society and found themselves challenged about the graduates they were producing – were they the right kind – the research they were undertaking – was it really ground-breaking? The shifting role of the government created what has been seen as a seismic shift in higher education, encompassing approach, funding, structure, influence and demand (Trowler, 2002).

The resulting changes of neo-liberal economic ideology have been felt across the globe not only by institutions through new ways of working, a corporatisation of the sector and introduction of managerialism to measure outputs (Biggs, 2002) but Becher (1994) and Becher and Trowler (2001) identified that individual disciplines were affected too. Emphasis was given to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects at the expense of humanities (aligning with Callaghan's suggestion of social engineering some decades earlier). The ripples of policies and emphasis had impact which moved beyond changes within individual institutions but saw also changes in the alignment of institutions themselves, evidenced in changes within mission groups leading to expansion of the Russell Group of 'elite universities' and increased emphasis on research as an income source. Part of this shift was brought about from 1986 when the Research Assessment Exercise was introduced (this became the Research Excellence Framework post 2008) that informed the allocation of research funding.

Universities began to explore different ways of working through transnational and international education programmes, and several engaged with the increasing opportunities of technology to explore delivering courses online to develop both engagement and income.

The increase in the numbers heading to higher education resulted in some HEIs having to focus attention on not only attracting but then investing to retain students and their associated funding. Indeed much effort and funding was devoted during the early to late 2000s in retention measures (Yorke & Longden, 2004; Crossling et al, 2009; Harding et al, 2009; Williamson & Harding, 2011).

## **2.9 Might the Graduate Voice be just another neo-liberalist evaluation?**

Proposals to take account of the 'Graduate Voice' may appear yet another neo-liberalist evaluation measure. However increased evaluation is an impact of devolved powers or responsibilities, visible today across multiple areas of the public sector from General Practitioners' surgeries to education. By understanding and articulating what value graduates perceive from their degrees,

their perspective may expand recognition of higher education from the purely commercial to the broader personal in much the same way school and college leaders are seeking to broaden the ways their institutions are viewed by potential stakeholders (NAHT & ASCL 2014).

Determining methods to evaluate and understand the influences upon that graduate perception is a complex challenge as this study recognises. Identifying the value individuals perceive in and resulting from their degree experience is important, for those individuals to recognise the distance they have travelled, for prospective students to recognise the potential open to them, and to institutions to maximise and enhance value within their degrees. The Graduate Voice may indeed be seen by some as an evaluation mechanism, another strand in ranking institutions but it also provides a potential unexplored way to recognise and enhance lasting value in a degree.

Broader and systematic articulation of the graduate voice has the potential to rebalance the commercialism and subsequent commercial expectations of the cost-benefit analysis of HE. Most of the evaluation of higher education is coming from students currently in the system, and as Scott observed like surgery and legal advice it is difficult for purchasers to evaluate at the point of delivery.

*“Evaluation is often more related to the quality of service by which it is provided.”* (1999:199).

Boni and Des Gasper considered evaluation rarely effective unless it expanded beyond the economic alone.

*“There is no consensus about what a good university is, but increasingly priority has been given to a narrow focus on contribution to supporting economic production and growth, as part of an economy-centred and market-centred conception of society. We argue that a human development approach is also very often relevant in educational policy and evaluation and can assist us to define and characterize a good university.”* (2012: 451).

This mirrors the move to widen goals across all educational sectors (Flum & Kaplan, 2006).

The dominant discourse of individualism within education, which for many was demonstrated by choice and autonomy leading to achievement of aspiration, intellectual goals and social mobility, can from the neo-liberal-influenced literature be identified as a stemming from economic value within the triadic values of HE. Taking a Foucauldian perspective the discourse is being controlled by the political 'elite' to justify levying fees, a social control influencing hearts and minds and actions. Habermas though argued that discourse is primarily designed to bring those involved to achieve shared understanding.

## Summary

- Established the historical context of value and purpose of higher education
- Explored the impact of political policies and associated funding streams to develop more commercialised, regulated higher education.
- Identified the overarching hegemonic discourse as becoming during the 20th century one of value in economic/financial terms
- Identified the need for an informed approach to the value of higher education to individuals and society to encompass economic, academic and personal elements.



### Chapter Three: Voices of influence in 21st century Higher Education

As has been seen from Chapters 1 and 2 the value of the role of higher education in society and the lives of individuals has been subject to change over recent decades. This chapter considers how perceptions of value are influenced by multiple stakeholders surrounding and within HE, with particular emphasis on where and how the voices of graduates, those with a unique first-hand experience of higher education, are heard. The Chapter further explores how the various voices are heard systematically and considers their potential to influence higher education policy and practice. It looks at how changes in emphasis and contributors to this process inform the sector as well as those who have power over it and involvement within it.

This chapter turns attention to the background to systematically and explicitly seek what I have termed the “graduate voice” of the degree experience and the potential impact of employing this at what can be identified as micro (individual), miso (institutional) and macro (sector) levels.

In England, as we saw in Chapter Two, the emphasis of political policy on widening participation and increasing numbers taking degrees whilst raising personal financial contributions for doing so has naturally led to consumerist questions and evaluation. At the individual level potential students are asking (often encouraged by parents and teachers), What will I get for my investment of time, effort and money? The media too are asking this question increasingly, not only in England, as numbers in HE rise globally. Whether relaying a positive or negative response they draw on recruitment reports, statistical analysis and cherry picked graduate experiences to answer the question, although generally this is delivered in economic/financial terms alone and couched in speculative terms of ‘expect to earn’ ( Vasagar et al, 2012; Merritt, 2013; Tovey, 2014; Piggott, 2015) . These questions are posed for the sector as a whole, but each individual institution is asking how they articulate and demonstrate not only their value today but how a degree from their institution has value and currency tomorrow.

### 3.0 Is the graduate voice silent, hidden or already heard?

The consumerist approach to higher education and the political policy of widening participation introduced within Chapter Two has opened the sector's doors wide. This results in the higher education sector's capacity to influence being extended by increased participation and international reach. This expansion has however additionally increased the flow and complexity of incoming expectations and influences. It is also overlaid with the evaluative culture of metrics and rankings now prevalent within commercialised higher education.

Fig. 1 (p.29) identified 13 influences which impact upon prospective undergraduates' perceptions of the value of an undergraduate degree specifically within English universities. I propose to explore these stakeholders to consider how policies and perceptions are influenced by them, and where is it possible to do so, to identify where the graduate voice is heard explicitly or implicitly within each. In order to achieve a fuller picture of the views which impact society's perceptions of degree value it is important to add two further perspectives – those of the prospective students themselves and graduates, the alumni of the system. The interconnected nature of individuals and our multiple identities makes this picture necessarily connected. The values we hold as individuals in the persona say of a graduate, has the capacity to influence our judgment related to HE in our other roles, whether as an employer, parent or employee for example. The interwoven nature of stakeholder voices surrounding higher education makes untangling their influence a complex activity in order to evaluate their impact.

Figure 4 revises the Figure 1 diagram demonstrating the additional complexities and voices which surround HE by indicating importance and location of each to the HE sector. Some stakeholders are internal to the HE sector, some external, some have direct influence and others have peripheral influence, some overlap and others intersect. Within each of these 'voices' that of the graduate may be explicit or implicit, but is currently only heard systematically in a few key places – within the media, via specific reports (Destination of Leavers from Higher Education, DLHE), and institutional advancement programmes.

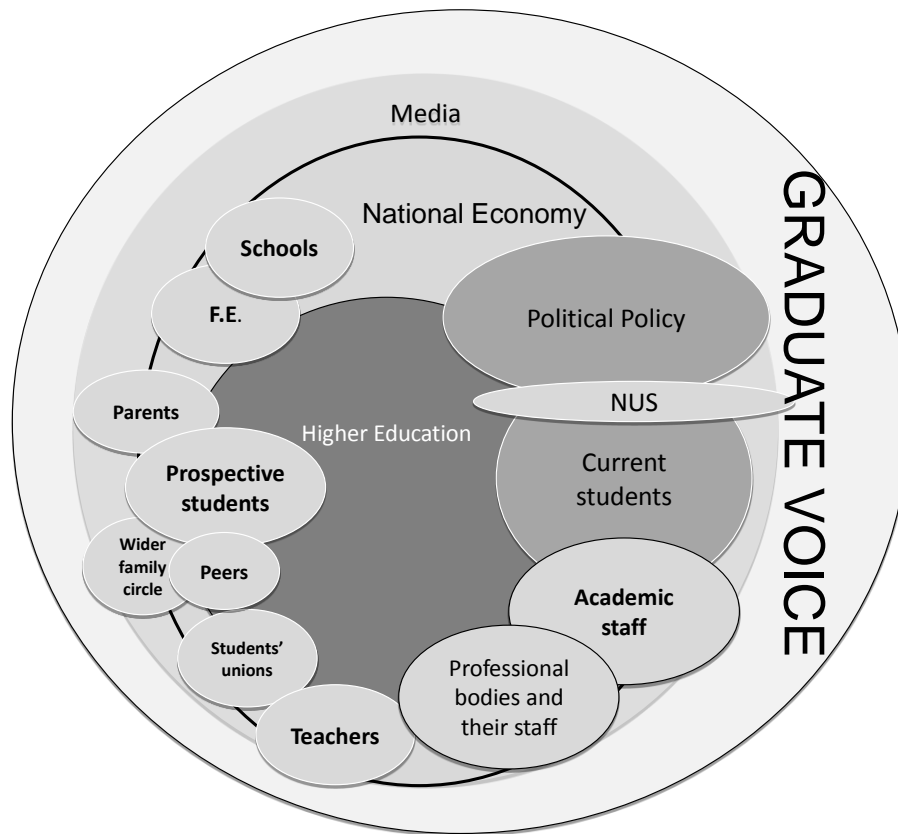


Fig. 4 Voices of influence impacting higher education and the perception of value of a degree

### 3.1 Employers, professional bodies, government and the economy

Employers and professional bodies, like governments, benefit from embedded graduate knowledge. Increasing numbers within these organisations will be graduates. Whilst not formally inputting their opinion as to the value of a higher education degree, each graduate has the potential to be an influencer and ambassadors from their individual perspectives and individual capacity to influence within the milieu in which they work.

In economic terms the value of higher education as perceived by those attracted and involved within it has significant impact upon national economies. Maintaining and sustaining a healthy higher education sector is vital to national GDP. Between 2011 and 2014 the higher education sector increased 25 per cent to generate £73billion (Universities UK, 2014). According to the report the higher education sector was responsible for 2.8 per cent of the UK's gross

domestic product (GDP<sup>16</sup>) during 2011-2012. The sector additionally created 750,000 jobs.

Graduates themselves play a significant part not only within higher education but within UK society. The human capital stock, the financial evaluation of individuals and their capacity to generate income taking into account the drain they make on a nation's resources such as healthcare etc. indicates graduates embody 35.4% of the UK's human capital stock. Those without any formal qualifications embody 5.4% of the UK human capital stock.

### **3.2 Prospective students and their prior educational establishments**

Prospective students' value perceptions of HE are important in their contribution to overall perceptions of the value of a degree both externally (within society as a whole) and internally (within HE). If prospective students fail to believe in the value of a degree or view more value in alternatives such as apprenticeships or direct entry to employment, then higher education could see both a reduction in student numbers, both undergraduate and postgraduate, falling income and a shrinking of the sector (Brookes & Everett, 2009; Boulton & Lucas, 2011; Cochran, 2011). Given the importance and impact of higher education to individuals, society and economies identified in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 this could negatively impact economic development research programmes, create skills gaps and reduce the nation's GDP.

The voice of the prospective student is thus heard by the academe of HEIs, their staff and their competitors in terms of footfall and resulting income. Existing students see the incoming of Freshers as reinforcement of their own values in deciding to take a degree and this in turn connects the prospective students into a community of their peers, each of whom has made a similar decision based on perceived value.

Externally, prospective student numbers fuel and support the perceived value of higher education within schools and colleges, the main source of UK

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<sup>16</sup> GDP - Gross domestic product (GDP) is the monetary value of all finished goods and services produced by a country within a given period (generally a financial year).

undergraduates. The progression of pupils from schools and colleges to further and higher education forms part of the performance tables, metrics ranking educational institutions (Department for Education, 2015) . Schools regularly work with HEIs in their regions and beyond to inform and educate youngsters from primary to sixth form about the benefits and importance of higher education. Schools not only have influence upon their pupils, but the pupils choosing higher education can be seen through the metrics to have influence on the future of their former schools. Teachers who by their career paths are required to be graduates have been identified in several studies as significant influencers in undergraduate choice, and this is born out in research for this study (Brooks 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007; Sjaastad, 2011; Archer et al, 2014; thesis, Chapter 5.)

Whilst recognising the important impact of individual teachers in student decision-making, prospective students making judgments to value higher education as a route for their future over other options are potentially influenced by specific HE marketing strategies. These can be individual or organised through more cohesive joint approaches such as the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. For some outreach programmes can become income generating programmes whilst they are operating as well as investments in the future through work with schools. These agreements can share knowledge and facilities to support widening participation, as well as local agreements enabling development of teaching in schools, and programmes of research dissemination through community engagement which whilst including industry also works to inspire future generations.

In their commissioned report to HEFCE (2015) an independent research company identified 43 sources of information available to prospective university students (Fig. 4). Of these 40 have relevance in England. The sources of information amount to 19 private or independent companies (excluding individual institutions themselves); 9 registered charities (including UCAS); government or other legislative bodies; 4 other groups, one of which is European, two focused at parents and Aimhigher<sup>17</sup>; 4 funding bodies and the HE provider Jobs.ac.uk

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<sup>17</sup> AimHigher was a government funded initiative from 2004-2011 to encourage widening participation in higher education.

The graduate voice, whilst it cannot be explicitly identified within these sources of information, can be considered to be reflected to the prospective student through involvement of graduates within the information providers where these graduates may be employees or participants in research. Additionally some institutions call upon graduates to contribute to recruitment campaigns, prospectus endorsements and via participation in open days or promotional materials. It can be seen that this involvement is informal and selective.

Thus it can be seen that there are multiple influences upon the prospective student. We know from previous studies that prospective students are influenced by peers and parents (Brooks, 2003, 2004, 2007), many of whom may be graduates. These graduates particularly may have the capacity to prove extremely powerful advocates and influencers for prospective students because of their emotional influence or commanding of respect.

Wider social expectations on the educational choices and aspirations of students have also been identified as influencers on prospective students' value choices (Brooks & Everett, 2009). Studies such as Brooks' (2003, 2007) have researched aspects of impact of specific stakeholders - in the latter case identifying the impact of peers and parents together with social aspiration on the motivation of prospective HE students.

The prospective student voice itself is seen systematically by politicians, and industry (through bodies such as the CBI) via recruitment statistics reports from UCAS, HEFCE and regular ONS participation rates in higher education. Professional bodies have access to these but also direct involvement in recruitment numbers through individual institutions with accredited courses.

The importance of prospective students and enabling them to make the value judgments which support higher education can be seen to be formally coordinated, recognised and in turn able to systematically influence Government thinking via formal channels such as the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (government funded and managed by HEFCE). Informally the prospective student perception of value is fed back through Open Day evaluation

forms, footfall, and increasingly through social media evaluation to schools, HEIs and Students' Unions.

Thus the influence of parents, peers, family, wider social circles, schools through their teachers and FE all have the potential to include the graduate voice. However there is no systematic way of seeking this, only for individual graduates to hear from individual graduates articulating their perceptions of value in their individual experiences, and as will be seen from the subsequent research (Chapter 5) this has the capacity to prove extremely powerful, particularly when delivered by someone with emotional influence, or whose opinion the potential student respects.

Schools and FE colleges are in dialogue with schools and HE institutions as part of outreach activities, and in this way perceptions of value may be exchanged although it is not always identified if these are perceptions of graduates themselves. Equally parents, schools and FE are connected to employers and professional bodies in individual capacities and whether they are graduates or not, these connections have the potential to inform or influence. Thus the graduate voice among parents, peers, family, wider social circles, schools and Colleges of Further Education, whilst not specifically gathered systematically (and it is difficult to see how it might be) should be acknowledged as having significant direct and indirect impact on perceptions of degree value.

### **3.3 Academics, HEIs and HE staff generally**

Whilst policies and reports may seek to put students at the heart of the higher education system, academics may be seen to be the constant lifeblood of that system, responsible for teaching, learning and research, the entrepreneurial activity and ultimately the realisation of expectations from their institution and their students as well as wider stakeholders, funders and peers. Academics themselves are now identified as teachers, tutors, researchers, facilitators of learning, and 'service providers' (Scott 1999), accountable for the satisfaction and knowledge development of their students. Whilst they will generally be graduates (although some direct entry academics arrive from industry), they are not

automatically subscribers to the perception that there is unassailable value within a degree as the despondent academic I quoted in my introduction exemplified.

The changes to the sector in terms of expectation have led to changes in academic roles and thus to altered perceptions of value about higher education itself. In Australia where changes in funding were implemented in the 1980s (Dawkins, 1988) the impact upon academics of the move to the 'enterprise university' (Marginson & Considine, 2000:5).with market based rationalisation and emphasis on quality as well as output has begun to be evaluated. The corporatisation of Australian and UK universities has meant an increase in demands for academics to be consultants, teachers, researchers and ambassadors of the university brand. This resulted in concerns about quality being voiced (Barnett, 1992; Shore & Roberts, 1995; Karmel, 2000; Alderman & Brown, 2005) and high levels of occupational stress reported (UCU October 2012). Shore and Wright identified additional concerns:

*"While the government claims that modern systems of audit have enhanced the quality of learning and teaching in higher education, critics argue that they have merely created a 'culture of compliance' and a climate of fear."* (1999:568).

For many academics the emphasis of profit over prestige or even the merging of profit and prestige within what are generally non-profit organisations (Garvin 1980; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) has created conflict within institutions and between institutions and politicians. In Australia where reforms of the sector are further ahead than the UK, Milne was blunt in his summation of the resulting system:

*"...the government and the society has no appreciation or serious interest in academic quality; that there has been inadequate monitoring of quality for incoming foreign students – they are seen as cash cows for an underfunded system; and that there are common complaints that many academic administrators who have prospered under the existing systems, are overly concerned with revenue generation and bureaucratic empire building – academic quality concerns are restricted to glossy brochures and absurd bureaucratic indices and league ladder reports."* (2001:18).



Expectations of academics themselves differ from institution to institution, but having worked with academics and as an academic over the past decade I have identified a significant increase in perceived pressures upon them. These stem from demands to complete administrative roles of student management as well as intellectual development, marketing courses, public engagement activities and marketing their research. All this is evaluated and scrutinised regularly by managers, accountants and now also by students. Professional relations and indeed professionalism is inspected and quantified (Strathern, 1997). The fact that the workload demands prioritisation inevitably results in conflict (Brennan et al, 1997).

Many institutions have created new, or augmented, existing departments to support and develop academics, and indeed have in turn generated employment attracting those like myself, but it is clear that whilst for some academics this investment in their practice is welcomed, it is seen as little more than tick-box interference by others. Educational development has however become a recognised part of the continuous reorganising, reconstructing and transforming nature of higher education in the current century.

These departments have had a dual role in developing with academics the professionalism of the teaching and programme structures to genuinely enhance the provision of departments and individuals in terms of developing and delivering learning. Such departments are both seeking ways to evaluate their impact and seeking to make their impact match evaluation targets, existing or proposed (HEA).

In America the free market resulted in many courses being cut if they failed to recruit large numbers, which in turn led to a limited academic offering in some institutions. Waugh highlighted the trend to offering to meet the immediate market or the employer's needs as a real and resultant threat to the academic future and integrity of higher education. *"Higher education may become intellectual fastfood and the long-term needs of society will not be well served."* (1998:62)

Examination of the Australian system some years later led Freudenberg and Samarkovski to also issue a stark warning of the implications:

*“Universities are places for the creation and the dissemination of knowledge. The value of universities is appreciated in economic terms, and can be intrinsically linked with the future prospects of a country. For those in the sector this has created a dynamic and challenging environment, and for academics it has had an adverse impact on their enthusiasm, particularly for teaching. This is in part because (good) teaching is hard to measure, and universities have tended to focus on recognising and rewarding research.” (2014:29-30)*

There is also significant impact in the academic-student relationship as a result of these changes. Students may view academics as providers, expecting answers, and degrees as a consumer right for which they have paid (Tomlinson, 2014).

Whilst some academics view this with alarm, for many, particularly the generation entering higher education now, it is recognition that higher education has caught up with the rest of the world. The ivory towers of academia are now as target driven as other areas of employment, indeed of other areas of education. Academics in the UK face challenges. They are through their institutions subject to the law if they fall short, to the impact of Ombudsmen and Trading Standards, but their outcomes in many respects depend upon the attitudes and engagement of their ‘customers.’

Many other employees at higher education institutions are graduates, often of the institutions at which they work, and thus the voice of the graduate within higher education can be seen as individual as well as often powerful. The personal influence of graduates in higher education clearly depends upon their roles, with those who are Vice Chancellors with the ear of government considered to have more influence and impact than others. Individually or collectively, as the voice of academe, the graduate employed within HE may be justifiably considered to have a vested interest in promoting, maintaining and enhancing the value of a degree.

But it is also from within higher education that the value which graduates perceive within their degrees in a wider capacity than the economic/financial alone is sourced. Higher education institutions seek through their marketing teams and alumni offices, which in some cases are within a single department, as well as in

some cases through academic engagement with alumni to hear the graduate voice.

These marketing statements are seen in promotional materials from all institutions and systematically seek to include the graduate voice as evidence of achievement and impact to inform prospective students as well as employers. They additionally may have impact upon current staff and students. The graduates involved are selected to promote the specific messages of the institution and the emphasis or ethos they wish to project. Whilst the rhetoric includes significant emphasis on the role of the universities as vehicles for change to be wrought by individuals, there is a fine line between promise and expectation. Such promises formed the basis of a warning to the sector which came just 11 years after Bloom's statement. Onsman with his insight into the Australian experience warned the sector about marketing-rich rhetoric based on shallow consumerism or instant gratification:

*"With the shift in focus comes the possibility of consumer-base litigation based upon contractual obligations." (2008:77).*

There is a risk that increased consumerism can fuel negative perceptions that the emphasis on explicit and regular review can lead to over focus or imbalance in analysis, that the complainant is heard over the satisfied consumer. In order for students engaging in higher education to really understand their options, the potential of the experience which Browne identified as fundamental to them making an informed choice, then accurate and detailed information is necessary and this needs to be delivered in a form with which they can both understand and engage.

There is also capacity for consumerism to fuel negative perceptions which can damage through promising much; regularly underlining the power of complaint despite attempting to demonstrate the system's apparent willingness to address issues ("You said, we did" campaigns); and constantly seeking to increase student numbers have led to what some regard as a decreased value and quality perceptions (Freeman & Thomas, 2015).

*" This is already noted as having negative consequences, such as universities that respond to their student base by guaranteeing degrees*

*regardless of effort expended, decreased quality of graduates, a backlash to this decreased quality by industry establishing its own universities and educational programs that are beginning to attract students who would otherwise attend traditional universities, and the public's perception of universities as having lesser standards and thus increasing the difficulty for graduating students to obtain jobs and devaluing the degrees, which in turn defeats the purpose of global expansion. It is necessary to consider whether the student can be given the responsibilities of being a consumer of education, and if so, under what conditions.” (2015:171)*

Freeman and Thomas clearly indicate the far reaching impacts of negative perceptions reflecting the enmeshed relationships of higher education as indicated in (Fig. 1). Following from the development of that relationship mapping, Ingham (2010) identified a series of questions required to be addressed to prevent the undergraduate-consumer relationship with higher education turning toxic and thus negatively influencing the perception of HE externally.

How can HE ensure all student-consumers and other stakeholders have correct, current and relevant information upon which to base their expectations of degree course and employability?

How realistic is the student-consumer expectation of their course and its outcomes?

How aware is the student-consumer of their responsibilities and obligations in the learning process?

How realistic is the student-consumer perception of the reality and demands of the industry (where they aim to seek employment post degree)?

(Ingham, 2010:46)

The work was based on research among journalists, employees traditionally previously trained in Further Education colleges, through apprenticeship indentures offered to school leavers and with graduates from English, History or Politics degrees. However the key questions 1-3 about awareness of entry onto courses have applicability for any students with question 4 being particularly relevant to any students aiming for a vocational degree whether law or medicine, journalism or engineering. Graduates were identified as having key roles as

diffusers of potential issues due to their particular capacity to influence based on their unique credibility and application of degree experience.

### 3.4 Current students

From my research for this study I would contend that there has been a move in the source of the predominant discourse within HE to attribute greater value within the system to the Student Voice. This has in some cases seen the student voice becoming the most regularly sought and most influential for both government bodies and HE institutions, but it appears to me that this is not as much about identifying value, as identifying satisfaction (Gibson, 2010; Fine & Clark, 2013 ). This may stem from a desire to hear from those undergoing the experience, or as a way of controlling customer satisfaction and limiting potential complaints.

The desire to hear the student can be argued to stem from the controversial introduction of tuition fees from 1998 to 2004 and again in 2012, from £1,000 to a maximum of £9,000 a year. Alongside this move came a series of government policies intended to increase the existing and burgeoning competition within HE. Number caps were lifted for students with high A level results, tougher visa regulations for international students, more focus (Browne) on students being informed and checking that they had been, all led to a change and a focus on the undergraduate student experience from pre-application to transition into work as graduates.

This student voice is being heard in multiple ways both internally within higher education through module evaluations, student surveys, and internal staff/student liaison committees as well as externally to politicians, employers, and the media via the NSS, HEA reports, NUS consultations and other formal routes. It is additionally heard economically in continued income for institutions and contribution to the economy, particularly in terms of attracting income from abroad.

The graduate voice appears informally and selectively to current students through interventions in academic courses either as providers of placements, careers

talks, or informed expert guest lectures. Further opportunities to hear the graduate perspective of value comes in some institutions through high profile alumni philanthropy (Warren et al, 2014) or schemes such as buddying or alumni awards to current students.

Funding and policy changes have not only altered the way higher education institutions are expected and required to act, but have also changed the role and identity of students as key players in 'the student experience' increasing the importance of the student voice. In this respect it is seen as a way that student engagement can add value to higher education both to the individuals involved, the institutions to which they belong, and the sector as a whole, through enthused student ambassadors and also in meeting regulatory quality expectations (QAA, 2012).

In recent times, HE institutions and government bodies have been placing and been required to place increasing importance on student satisfaction as a measure of the overall student HE experience (Gibson, 2010). The data of the NSS for example, completed by students as they approach the final months of their final undergraduate year, feeds newspaper rankings and the KIS. van der Velden addressing the 2012 RAISE<sup>18</sup> conference told delegates:

*"The power has moved' the power used to lie with funding councils and QAA – in the next few years when we talk about shared governance it is likely to lead institutions looking to be working with the students and the SU."* (Conference Keynote:13 September 2012)

Her predictions can be seen have come to fruition. Students' Unions associated with HEIs through their block grants, have also been subject to this resulting change in policy and practice (Brooks et al, 2014), in some cases taking the initiative to use their increased status to influence improvements (Ingham et al, 2014). Many Students Unions have the capacity to articulate the graduate voice through their policy of actively employing graduates specifically for their 'lived experience' and thus their capacity to influence and inform members.

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<sup>18</sup> RAISE – a national network of academics, students and interested parties focused on Researching Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement.

Whilst welcoming the inclusion of the student voice it should be recognised that the relationship between students and their institutions, and students and the academics as well as the studies on which they are asked to comment are not free of power restraints and implications which may influence their responses.

### 3.5 Media

Journalists not only inside but outside higher education have had a significant role to play within the discussion and debate surrounding the value perceptions of today's higher education. Whilst some headlines were clearly hyperbole, others were based on factual analysis. Their various readerships of graduates, prospective students, parents, employers, academics, HEI managers and politicians to name but a few heard warnings, siren calls, alarm bells and occasionally positive messages. The headlines have been so common they are too numerous to list. As a collective force over a period of time they have resulted in an element of questioning which could be considered to fuel a Cohenesque (1973) style approach to creating 'media storm' in terms of their persistent questioning of value within the degree experience, however in their questioning, they rarely challenge the hegemony of economic/financial value. To question is accepted as a role of the media, and the ways in which official reports and statistics, many of which have not been overtly negative, have resulted in headlines which call the value of a degree into question is perhaps a subject for specific study. The interest of this study in the media voice is to demonstrate that the value of a degree and the hegemonic discourse is being questioned within society, but always from an economic/financial focus whatever the media platform (Corney, 2004; Henry, 2011; Morgan, 2011; Selingo, 2013; Griffiths, 2014; The Economist, 2014; Tierney, 2014).

McCombs & Shaw (1972) recognised that media coverage influences public opinion, and that individuals rely on media for their own information (Perse 2001). Through their reporting news media legitimise opinions and events, signifying that they require public notice (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; McQuail, 1994). As more media outlets pick up the story and repeat it, or deliver their own 'take' upon it, the importance of that event or perception grows (Perse 2001; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Reporting of whether a degree has value to the

graduate has been evident over the years but increased in frequency in countries with fee increases.

Thus it can be seen that the graduate voice both informs and is informing media coverage but generally through an individual approach. Whilst the media does focus on more systematic graduate perceptions these tend to be through coverage of occasional reports arising from studies commissioned by organisations connected to Higher Education such as the HEA, HEPI, and Government departments as well as those from institutions keen to underline the value of an education in their university to their alumni.

### 3.6 Whose is the dominant voice now and how has this arisen

Since introduced in 2005 (HEFCE, 2006) the National Student Survey has sought the voices of all final year undergraduate students across all institutions in UK higher education. Unlike the NSSE in the United States of America students are not asked to assess their own contributions to their degree education although the HEA has run a pilot of the UKES (UK Engagement Survey) since 2013 (9 institutions in 2013, 32 in 2014).

Revisions to the Quality Code the QAA underlined the requirement for HEIs to not only embrace but demonstrate engagement with their students:

*“Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.” (2012:8)*

Institutions responded to this demand in different ways. For some this was an opportunity to identify their individual ethos and approach which could single them out to prospective students, for others their approach became an underpinning philosophy. Different institutions have taken differing approaches to including the ways in which they have included students within their changing practices (Healey, 2012). Some have adopted these approaches as ethos or usps of their institutions. In some cases the ‘*student as...*’ has underpinned curriculum development and academic practice, such as the University of Lincoln’s Students as Producers (<http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/> ; Neary, 2009).



The student as change agents discussion has sought to engage students in diverse ways with their curricula actively moving away from the student as consumer concept. It has however resulted, and to some extent still does result, in a clamour of competing voices offering new identities, opportunities for and pressures on students within institutional change (Dunn and Zandstra, 2011:17). Their model identifies students as participants in decision-making, partners in co-creation, experts, and evaluators of their HE experience (Student Voice).

Today's students are expected to be consumerist learners in their approaches to taking a degree, to respond to regular evaluation of their experience, and to get involved in governance and development of their experience through initiatives such as students as consumers<sup>19</sup> (Fisher, 1993; Williams 2012; Brown & Carasso 2013; Woodall et al 2014), students as producers<sup>20</sup>, students as partners (QAA 2012, Higher Education Academy, 2014), students as change agents in curriculum and teaching<sup>21</sup>, students as co-creators (Bryson, 2013 ) and the more long-standing, students as researchers (Fielding & Bragg, 2003) to name but a few. The impact of these initiatives on how students perceive value in their degree is being evaluated, but in many cases (Bryson, 2013; Yorke, 2014) early indications are that active and constructive learning engagement for students has a positive impact on student perceptions of value, perhaps through the self-authorship opportunities such relationships develop and demand. I shall return in Chapters Six and Seven to this area in light of my research findings.

In these various ways the Student Voice has become apparent, expected and required as part of monitoring and evaluation throughout higher education developing in visibility as well as influence. UK HE institutions by adopting these new approaches to working are trying to visibly provide answers to "What am I getting for my money?" (Littlemore, 2011). Responses understandably tend towards cost-benefits. However in the complex HE environment, equating value

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<sup>19</sup> Student as consumer stems from the economic and legal definition of a consumer as someone who pays for a product or service and in turn is protected by consumer rights legislation

<sup>20</sup> The idea of student as producer encourages the development of collaborative relations between student and academic for the production of knowledge. (Neary and Winn 2009: 209)

<sup>21</sup> Student as change agent perceives the student as 'active collaborator' and 'co-producer', with the potential for transformation (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011:4)

with pure financial advantage is constricting when that is not always an expected outcome, or if expected one which cannot be guaranteed for all students (Bell & Stevenson 2006; Monteils 2004). Callender & Wilkinson's Futuretrack (2013) report warned that setting purely economic degree expectations had the potential to make a degree experience dissatisfying and disappointing. Thus drawing on graduates' wider value perceptions as this study seeks to do will support a broader, more realistic recalibration of student expectations as well as better understanding for other HE stakeholders.

### **3.7 Changing influence of student voice, student experience and the role of the student**

Temple et al (2014) related human capital theory to current students' academic experiences, social capital theory to their campus experiences and economic capital within their graduate experience. This however appears limiting to the potential for graduates in particular limiting the potential evaluation of recognition of impact of their degree in social and human capital terms as they move through their careers. It also limits graduates who may also be current students, particularly those who are mature, part time or indeed distance learners in their capacity to evaluate economic capital during their degree experience.

### **3.8 Who is hearing the voices and what is their impact?**

Within institutions the audibility of stakeholders is today clearly connected to the student voice and value for money. This is seen through not only institutional incomes which are significantly influenced at 60 per cent or more from student fees, as shown in the ways in which institutions are responding to the annual NSS with regular action planning and enhancement activity.

The old adage of "He who pays the piper calls the tune" applies to higher education in terms of research funding, and now also to student fees. From 2017 higher education value will include requirements to meet the Government's Teaching Excellence Framework being designed to demonstrate value for money for fee-paying students and taxpayers. Johnson said the TEF would allay fears such as those voiced in graduate surveys of the first £9,000 paying students.

*“I am concerned that recent surveys- HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience Survey as well as a BBC/ComRes poll – showed that only around half of students felt their course had provided good value for money. All of us need to reflect on this and on what we can do to address such unease.” (2015, speech).*

The change in the student role, the emphasis on ‘student experience’ evaluation and the subsequent expectations these encompass in academic, personal and career expectations has been significant in the UK since the introduction of new fee regimes. Definitions of how the student experience as a phrase is interpreted or indeed applied in practice are variable. However the expression and action resulting from it has gained momentum since the 2012 fees rise. It has become evident in one way by in the number of institutions investing in developing roles for Directors, Deans, and Officers of Student Experience. Some institutions consider student experience relates to the consumer exchange element, the accommodation and facilities clear loci for student engagement evaluation and monitoring. However the proliferation of ‘you said, we did’ consumer response mechanisms have affected many areas from module evaluations which form part of the evaluation process for everything from academic programmes to catering facilities.

In their 2014 HEA report “Managing the student experience in a shifting higher education landscape” Temple et al identified four areas of student experience which encompass an individual’s engagement with higher education : application, academic, campus and graduate experience. They recognise imprecision between all of these, and indeed it should be noted that even within the various metrics there are differences. Metrics themselves have begun to increase, each measuring different elements with differing success but from ‘student satisfaction’ perspectives (Green et al, 1994) to the HEPI and HEA Student Academic Experience Survey (HEPI-HEA, 2015).

There are concerns with the evaluation of student experience and debate as to whether it equates to customer satisfaction or evaluation of the quality of a degree (Bloom, 1987; Staddon & Standish, 2012). This apparent concern has been fuelled in light of the fundamental importance which the role of marketing has acquired within today’s higher education contrasting dramatically with that of

pre-neo-liberal days. That necessity of marketing developed with increased spending is not only to promote the institution concerned to wider audiences, like research councils and employers, but is also tasked with attracting and recruiting new students (Clarke, 2014). With the added cost comes added expectation of cost-benefit return. Bloom expressed this thus:

*“The university now offers no distinctive visage to the young person...there is no vision, nor is there a set of competing visions, of what an educated human being is...The student gets no intimation that great mysteries might be revealed to him [sic], that new and higher motives of action might be discovered...that a different and more human way of life can be harmoniously constructed by what he is going to learn.” (1987:337).*

Setting out a definite purpose for higher education Bloom clearly articulated the transformational goals of higher education in his statement. The problem over two decades later is perhaps however contrary to that which Bloom identified. It is not that there is no distinct offering to prospective individuals (although that might be said of mission values) but from all the aspirational persuasive marketing statements, there are perhaps now too many competing visions of what the university can offer to those who can afford higher education. From social lives to sport, accommodation to nightlife, world-leading research and industry experts, the ‘package’ which surrounds the academic course on offer to students is a vision of a different kind to that Bloom had in mind.

In light of the evaluation I would argue that the student voice whilst an important and relevant element of evaluation of current progress can be seen to be fickle, easily influenced and lacks depth and durability of degree application which the graduate voice has the potential to bring to evaluation. Whilst there is a risk of hindsight bias in seeking graduate perspectives which needs to be recognised (Hoffrage & Pohl, 2003), the necessity to seek empirical data about the value of a degree at distances further than 6 months needs to be recognised. Equally it has been shown that the more experience participants have with the focus of the research, the smaller is the resulting hindsight bias (Christensen-Szalanski & Wilham, 1991). Thus it is expected on bias will be lessened by the fact that a degree is an intensive experience.

### 3.9 Current engagement with and application of the graduate voice

Engagement with and of the graduate voice remains spasmodic across the sector. It is left to individual institutions and tends to employ the engaged, the self-selecting graduate rather than achieve the fuller picture of graduate perceptions. In Chapter One we heard of graduate involvement in marketing to prospective students, and philanthropic giving, a significant area to which I will return in Chapter Seven.

This declaration of values from those who have lived experience is powerful and an important one within institutions and this is recognised in many institutions through regular but 'cherry picked' engagement with past graduates. However the sector has yet to routinely seek the value perceptions of alumni on a regular, ongoing basis to inform future development, or indeed to routinely monitor the long-term trajectories and perceptions of those who hold their degrees, although this is achieved in one area of the United States. Within the tight-knit environment of the United States Air Force Academy, graduates and their futures are carefully monitored. As the only State-funded higher education this continuous research is in part to evaluate the efficacy of investment enabling it to be seen that the Academy produces on average 23 per cent of the service's officer corps and nearly 50 per cent of the service's senior leaders (Langley, 2015).

### 3.10 Evaluation of the graduate voice

Back in 1964 Nelson commented:

*"One factor often overlooked is the final product, the graduate. This factor is perhaps the most significant determinant of adequacy of programs and measure of effectiveness."* (1964:111).

Work with graduates was identified by Nelson as being designed to develop existing academic programmes for relevance, and to promote amended courses to prospective students. Nelson alluded to the ways in which follow up studies developing increased contact with the alumni were also employed by fundraisers within American colleges.

Since then it has been apparent that the collation of graduate perspectives of value as they related to individual courses and institutions has continued to be employed on a periodic, spasmodic basis by both programme teams and marketing arms of higher education. However we have in more recent times as justification of financial outlay by tax payers and individuals seen formal research among graduates in terms of the HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience Survey.

Graduates may and indeed will by definition appear in some stakeholder categories, (Figs.1 & 4 schools, academe, professional bodies and competing institutions), but the graduate voice from their degree experience remains significantly absent in a regularly, consistently and specifically sought or explicit capacity. Thus it could be considered that the graduate voice is not silent but hidden within the evaluation and enhancement of HE through informed feedback.

There are two formal studies which currently seek the graduate voice in higher education which will shortly be explored within this chapter – both focused on employment data. The informal approaches to actively seeking the graduate voice in order to inform HE are more diverse and vary from institution to institution. An outline of the existing involvement drawn from my informal research among alumni offices in four English institutions appears in Table 1.

This indicates that there are just two formal points of investigation of the graduate voice existing in current HE evaluation and these both relate to assessment of the career impact of the individual's degree experience. Both take the form of questionnaires, one for graduates six months from their studies and the other for graduates three and a half years from their undergraduate degrees. Since 1994 destinations have been collated by HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) in what is now known as the DLHE Survey.

This inclusion of the graduate voice specifically around the employability agenda, is implemented by institutions individually with the results forming part of both institutional information and the basis for key information set (KIS) statistics about graduate employability, which in turn feed into national league tables. According to HESA's 2014 guidance to operating institutions:

Table 1. Informal implementation of the graduate voice

GV interaction with elements of HE institutions	Informing
Academic teams involved in curriculum design and delivery for current and future students	graduates in employment known to be supportive of the benefits and shortcomings of their experience informing maintenance and development
Placement teams/ careers offices	providing placements/ internships
Graduates/academics	sporadic informing of academics Graduates in contact with those academics they have retained contact with, for a variety of reasons including seeking referencing
Careers/alumni offices and sometimes academics	Graduates mentoring through alumni schemes for development of alumni/student buddying
Alumni/ marketing offices	Graduates invited to attend in person or in video institutional promotional events, contribution to other marketing approaches/publications, contributions to open days with a focus on course impact

Not only can the DLHE provide back-up statistics for university departments' marketing campaigns and during course reviews, it also serves as a barometer for measuring the success with which departments are equipping their graduates for the outside world. (HESA guidance to institutions, 2014)

The fact that the survey approaches recent graduates, for example the 2015 study approached all those students who had graduated in the summer of 2014 to ask their work and study activity as of January 2015 was a source of early complaint that within some disciplines this timing may encompass a period of experience acquisition. Within the 2015 study such concerns were addressed with both working full-time and working part-time descriptors reading: *"including self-employed, voluntary or other unpaid work, developing a professional portfolio/creative practice or on an internship/placement."* (DLHE question, 2015)

### 3.11 Breadth of graduates' degree experience is not currently encompassed

The DLHE, like the longitudinal study focuses on discipline, application of degree to employment or further study as can be seen from part of the 2015 questionnaire:

"How well did your recent course and any extra-curricular activities you were involved in (including placements undertaken while you were studying)

Q28 Prepare you for employment?				
Very well	Well	Not very well	Not at all	Can't tell
Q29 Prepare you for further study?				
Very well	Well	Not very well	Not at all	Can't tell
Prepare you for being self-employed/freelance or for starting up your own business?				
Very well	Well	Not very well	Not at all	Can't tell

There is no shortage of challengers to the accuracy or indeed relevance of the DLHE data when it is released annually. In 2015 The Edge Foundation, a vocational skills charity promoting apprenticeships and workplace opportunities, questioned the classifications used to define graduate jobs. Their Acting Chief Executive David Harbourne said their research demonstrated:

*"Going straight to university at 18 or 19 no longer offers a guaranteed fast track to a good job, particularly for people who choose a degree in the arts, social sciences or humanities. The uncomfortable truth is that vast numbers of graduates struggle to get onto the professional career ladder when they leave university. Young people, parents and teachers need better information about job prospects."* (August, 2015, online).



As the number of graduates increases there is concern that the graduate job market is not expanding accordingly (Aston & Bekhradnia, 2003; Brown & Hesketh, 2004) For some time there have been concerns that many graduates consider they are over-qualified for the jobs they are doing (Keep, 2014).

In 2004 Gedye, Fender and Chalkley (2004) called specifically for the employability agenda to pay attention to both the current student and graduate voice and looked at graduates up to seven years from a specific course (geography) in a specific institution (Plymouth). Their report explored the motivations for degree study: to develop subject knowledge/skills; to develop transferable skills (Assiter, 1995); to improve job/career prospects; to gain life experience; to leave home; other as well as the factors influencing their decision to study geography specifically: enjoyment/achievement at school; career options; career path relevance; other. Career prospects and opportunities were identified by 84 per cent of freshers (first year new undergraduates) and 72 per cent of graduates as their main reason for studying a degree. Unrealistic ambition or strongly competitive graduate labour market experiences were evaluated as possible reasons for the imbalance, leading the researchers to consider the graduate voice the more realistic and thus more informative as a source of enhancement.

Gedye et al concluded that the graduate voice had an important role to play in informing employability approaches:

*“It is important that any employment-related developments and initiatives are informed by the opinions and experiences of present and former students.” (2004:381)*

The additional question might be asked that if the sector is developing expectations of student engagement during the time students are undertaking their degrees, it is also setting expectations of greater graduate engagement post graduation, and is that fulfilled?

Brooks and Everett (2009) highlighted the importance of prospective students entering higher education with clear and realistic expectations. Like Schumpeter (1943) they predicted discontent arising from failure to find employment appropriate to education. However they went further to identify disillusion with an

undergraduate degree had the potential to curtail further developmental engagement in the future, with professional courses or postgraduate study:

*“If young adults do indeed feel misled about the rewards of a higher education, it is possible that this may have a significant bearing on their perceptions of the value of engaging in further education and training in the future.” (2009:333)*

This echoed Dwyer and Wyn’s findings (2001) but whilst Brooks and Everett warned of potential dangers, they found that most of the UK graduates they interviewed were generally realistic and thus more pragmatic. Their ESRC-funded study drew on 90 graduates who had mostly graduated nine years previously. Their work clearly indicates that these graduates have gained awareness and knowledge enabling them to recognise value of their degree and its constituent elements in context. For some this was expressed through seeing a degree as a minimum requirement for career progression, whilst others feeling with hindsight it had opened doors. A key element of this report is its identification that many graduates from areas particularly in humanities and arts transition from university into ‘liminal’ periods of temporary employment where they are gaining the necessary experience to secure permanent work. (Purcell & Elias, 2005; Furlong & Cartmel, 2005; Brooks & Everett, 2009; Rutherford & Pickup, 2015). The latter emphasise the value to the sector of undertaking HE exit surveys to identify points of transitional improvement within the degree process. The graduate voice however would appear to offer benefits to enable better informed transitions in addition to identification of the areas of struggle evident within some transitions that are necessary in order to achieve value.

### 3.12 Theoretical context for seeking the graduate voice

There is a clear theoretical context for seeking the graduate voice for its potential to develop the learning process and thus future education through evidence.

Utilising the graduate voice to develop learning about and within higher education, its value and impact can be seen to have potential relevance within the theoretical base of pedagogy. Marion defined pedagogy as the science of education (quoted in Best, 1988:154). Vygotsky (1997b:348) indicated pedagogy as being influenced by the priorities, visions and values of society at the time, and indeed employment of the Graduate voice aligns to the demands of current political thinking that were explored in Chapter Two. Thus it can be seen that the ways in which individuals and institutional policies seek to develop learning change due to external influences. Learning by and from experience, whether directly or indirectly is recognised pedagogic practice.

I propose to explore the potential for pedagogical impact through formal collation and evaluation of the graduate voice employing Bernstein's definition:

*"Pedagogy is a sustained process whereby somebody(s) acquires new forms or develops existing forms of conduct, knowledge, practice and criteria from somebody(s) or something deemed to be an appropriate provider and evaluator. Appropriate either from the point of view of the acquirer or by some other body(s) or both."* (1999:259).

This broad definition has applicability in seeking to employ the knowledge of those who, under the system's own evaluation, are learned evaluators. These individuals, the graduates of higher education, are therefore educated through their experiences to impart the knowledge of those experiences. This knowledge has the potential to simultaneously inform multiple audiences of potential learners: those who are learning; those who are teaching; those who are managing higher education institutions and those who are creating higher education policy which takes account of derived value. There is an interesting parallel to be drawn in using these informed experts to develop knowledge of learning within what Vygotsky termed a zone of proximal development – that area between what is known and not known, through which an expert peer guide can lead the learner. This led him to identify that higher mental functions are social in both origin and nature.

Bernstein's definition of those who develop learning in others to change conduct, attitude or knowledge has clear applicability to graduates. Their contribution in developing learning within others has the potential to change knowledge of the higher education experience. Possibly through informing changes in attitude of value perception and in altering the ways in which courses, as well as the marketing of those courses, are developed. The graduate voice has the potential to develop learning in others through contribution of gained knowledge (learning with and from an expert); inform institutional and sectoral research (learning from experimentation and experience); and directly develop knowledge of expectations as well as maximization of opportunities through peer learning (learning from and with each other both collectively and collaboratively) (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001; Candy, Crebert & O'Leary, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1997; Jacques, 2000).

Systematic collation of the Graduate voice provides a particularly powerful form of peer learning in terms of learning opportunities both with and from those with first-hand experience. Indeed it draws upon alumni, the only permanent stakeholders of higher education institutions (Webb, 1998; Gallo, 2012).

Thus it can be seen that these informed individuals have the capacity to be the exemplars of aspects of pedagogic theory within higher education. The 'sustained' nature of the learning process has relevance to this thesis, focused as it is upon the systematic engagement with and learning from graduates of higher education on a continuing basis. The continuous nature demanded by a sustained process enables layers of knowledge and understanding to be built incrementally, year-on-year to develop informed depth for institutions reflecting the constantly changing nature of higher education, society, industrial and professional needs and resulting expectations from a perspective that they have not currently, and never have systematically sought. There are no apparent reasons in the literature surrounding the development of higher education to indicate why the graduate voice is not currently systematically sought. These may in part be practical in terms of engaging graduates to contribute and the cost of doing so although this is becoming increasingly easier and cost effective with advances in technology. It seems unlikely that most institutions would be fearful

of the results. Indeed interviews with international graduates led researchers to comment:

*“Interestingly, their attitudes were generally more positive now than they had been immediately after graduation. Some alumni who had previously held negative views, due to particular personal experiences in the UK, had subsequently come to view these differently and now reflected positively overall.”* (CRAC, 2013:x).

The ‘somebody(s)’ of Bernstein’s evaluation are learners acquiring new forms or developing existing forms of knowledge and practice. In this case they would be institutions – both generically and through the work of individuals within them – who would be learning from the Graduate Voice. This they would employ to develop the knowledge and practice of their academic programmes/ courses, academics, current and potential students.

The engagement with institutions of their own graduates as appropriate providers of knowledge is something which is already recognised arbitrarily in many institutions. Whilst it may be seen by some as perhaps an additional form of neo-liberal evaluation of the higher education system where the product becomes the informant, it also enables the emergence of a fuller picture of the degree experience. This has the potential to enable learning from shortcomings so they can be addressed, and strengths recognised. It may additionally rebalance the neo-liberal approach of monetary value being of greatest import.

Philosophers and educational theorists alike have recognised that primary and secondary experiences and the ways in which we draw upon them to inform decisions, and as Foucault (1980) explained it to interpret our lives, are fundamental to our human learning development. In education this experiential learning and our reflection upon it is recognised as one of the basic ways in which we construct knowledge. Piaget (1977) identifies knowledge as being generated from our own interaction with our experiences and ideas. The graduate voice generates knowledge from interaction with experience whilst additionally enabling others involved in creating, but not in experiencing as participants, to construct knowledge of that experience by being given access through the lens of the graduate perspective.

Dewey (1916) whose approach to learning via personal construction through experience led to him being both lauded for his thinking and critically labelled as a progressive, observed the power of experiential learning. This has since been a recognised feature of research (Lewin, 1935, 1936; Lewin & Grabbe, 1945; Kolb, 1976; 1981; 1984; Kolb & Fry, 1975). All have highlighted the significant value of reflection as heightening the learning impact of experience. This recognition that we create and develop learning for ourselves from our own experiences and the importance of engagement in learning as Dewey maintained has been upheld by others including Houle who described experiential learning as

*“...education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life.”*  
(1980:221)

Whilst it is however the case that powerful individual experiential learning can stem from direct, immediate and very personal experiences, there is additional opportunity for both individuals and institutions to benefit both from what might be termed secondary experiential learning and from reflection upon this. We already see this operating within higher education today where institutions now seek the student voice through regular evaluation processes and often institutional-wide programmes of feedback. Whilst this may be identified by some as a clear nod to neo-liberal value-for-money approaches, a great deal may be learned from those informed by experiences both during, and it is argued in this thesis, after reflection upon the experience of an undergraduate degree. It has though been subject to criticism as being an area where more needs to be done, and seen to be done, in a meaningful collaborative fashion to respond to student feedback:

*“How to close the loop – visibly, explicitly – without relinquishing an ethos of partnership, is a growing challenge.”* (Marshall in Evasys, 2013:12).

Thus this learning from and through the experiences of others, utilising graduates as ‘vicarious motivators’ as Bandura puts it has potential it is argued to be a route to collect and collate better information for prospective students, academics, institutions, and for the HE sector as a whole. Indeed Bandura recognises

*“Observed outcomes can alter behavior just as directly experienced consequences can.”* (1986:283)

However as has been identified earlier in this chapter, systematically collecting and collating these experiences to inform future practice is not something currently being undertaken across the sector as a method of informing individuals and institutions. This appears a key strand of information to weave into the complex tapestry of higher education today so that the research within this thesis identifies not only whether and where graduates perceive value but illustrates how the Graduate Voice has potential to further inform existing perspectives about HE.

Since the Browne Report, student experience and student informed choice have become foci for the higher education sector. HEFCE's introduction of the KIS is already expanding to include teaching qualifications or recognition of teaching standards, and thus has the potential to develop further. Many institutions now have Student Experience departments looking specifically at the incoming data from current students and the knowledge generated from that to inform institutional policy and prospective students alike.

For many years HE institutions have had alumni associations and permanent alumni offices connecting with graduates. Very often the learning for current students stemming from interaction with alumni created by these networks has been informal rather than formal. However it is apparent that the ways in which current and prospective students benefit from this rich potential source of alumni insight is not always visible or systematic across the sector for reasons which will be explored. Currently the graduate portrayed within the alumni voice is selective and indeed to some extent self-selecting. A different picture of degree legacy might be obtained by a broader, more systematic approach to hearing the graduate voice as proposed within this work.

Consequently engagement with graduates has been recognised by parts of the sector as having value within four main areas namely:

- Recruitment and student awareness
- Teaching and Learning Enhancement
- Enhancing institutional advancement (IA)
- Benefiting alumni

However as each graduate has the capacity to influence others (Fig. 4) inside or outside higher education, directly or indirectly, in terms of their perceived value of higher education, the potential impact of disillusion can be seen to be significantly wider.

### 3.13 Hearing the voice of experience explicitly

Newman (2005:123) considers graduates to be consumers rather than participants. Others (Kozobarich, 2000; Gallo, 2014) consider alumni from the perspective of their multiple roles which they adopt in their connections with their universities. They are graduates, but also may belong in the local community, be university staff members, governors, parents of current students or have returned again to be students themselves either as direct or distance learners. Equally they may be simultaneously volunteers, mentors, and benefactors. Engaging graduate perspectives of the breadth of value they have experienced from their higher education whilst additionally building strong relationships with these ambassadors may have the potential to develop focused and tangential benefits for institutions, individuals and the sector going forward.

A brief glance at the key influencers within higher education policy in the past century (Chapter 2) indicates the impact that alumni from particular institutional groups are and have had in recent times in shaping political policy. As could be seen, graduates with the control of policy came from a relative few number of institutions. By understanding the perspectives of a broader group of graduates collected regularly over time it may be possible to harness an even more informed hindsight for prospective students and institutions about the value of individual institutions. Following graduates would enable evaluation of the aspirational graduate attributes being developed within institutions.

Institutions are generally led and governed by those who are some significant distance from the student life and often were not students in the institutions they then lead. Regular engagement with the graduate voice, not just those who always engage, but a broader base has the potential to add an additional perspective to enable institutional management to recognise where enduring value lies within their own institutions.



The anecdotal ‘benefits of hindsight’ need to be weighed against the more evaluative hindsight bias as identified by Weick et al (2005) in their study of retrospective sense-making . In this case are graduates merely adopting a rose-tinted spectacle view of a period in their lives in which they invested either years of their life or thousands of pounds, or in some cases thousands of pounds and several years of their lives. Given that investment would the majority hesitate to write it off as worthless? Will graduates generally be supportive of their alma mater and does that then devalue their opinions? Rob Behrens the Independent Adjudicator, (HE ombudsman) identified that of the 2000 complaints received annually the bulk came from students on vocational courses. (2015) Students taking subjects which they expected to lead to well-paid graduate employment like law, medicine, dentistry, business and administration were more likely to complain if things were not as they expected, or were led to believe. Behrens said 64 per cent of complaints in 2013 dealt with academic elements, “...*typically around progression between years and final degree or postgraduate outcomes.*” Expectations can be costly if unmet in terms of administration and potentially in settlements for cases which are upheld even if they do not reach court. In 2013 the OIA recommended compensation to students of £313,750, up two thirds on the previous year (OIA, 2013).

Setting expectations which are realistic, grounded in fact and evidence is one way to reduce the stress and expense of ombudsman complaints, students on the wrong courses, or not in the best institution for them and their aims. Multiple voices already inform current student experience and graduates already play a small and informal role in that process as can be seen from Figure 5.



Fig. 5 Venn diagram of impacts of student experience

However the move to increase transparency, evaluation and information raises the argument for research into the Graduate voice, as a vehicle for incorporating the opinions, experience and involvement of the permanent stakeholders at the heart of each institution. From this position the graduate voice has a crucial role to play within academic practice (Figure 6).

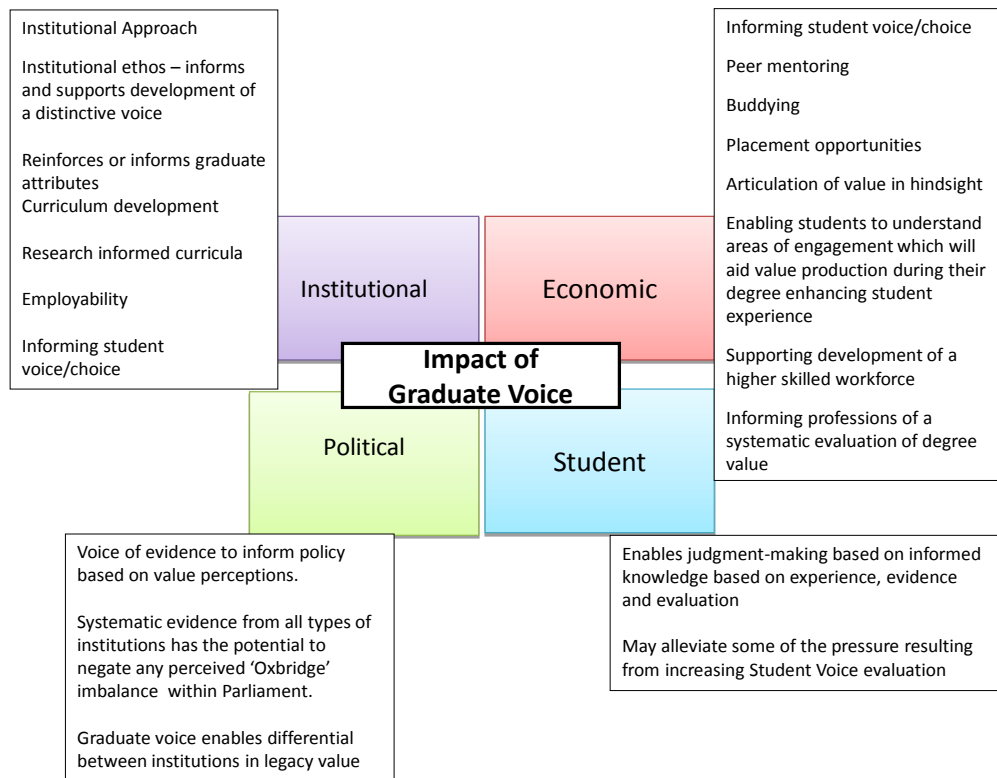


Fig. 6 Potential application of systematically seeking the Graduate Voice at distances from graduation (Ingham)

Habermas whilst developing his sense of the 'public sphere' fails to allocate universities a central role, although he clearly recognises the contributions of individuals from universities, to the development of the public sphere, and in this way may be indicating the potential influence as well as importance of the Graduate voice. He also identifies the power in the intellectual rendering of experience through reflection which has been identified earlier as an important element in developing the Graduate voice,

*"Its quality increases so that its proportionate value is very different. Hence the quality of the experience changes; the change is so significant that we*

*may call this type of experience reflective – that is reflective par excellence.” (1991:158)*

The emphasis we are seeing in terms of the marketisation of higher education (Selwyn, and Shore 1998) points towards a sector being influenced and informed by the political, economic argument. Whilst this is clearly important, and a major element of consideration in undertaking a degree for many students, and indeed for those employing graduates who consider the graduate skills will or should improve their business, it is unlikely to be the only factor perceived by graduates who have undertaken a degree.

### **3.14 Philosophical goal for this study**

In the same way that the jigsaw approach of marquetry relies on building up individual layers, each bringing individual character and colour to perception of the whole, seeking of the graduate voice is an attempt to assemble all the pieces and to add the patina of age to the resulting picture.

Thus it appears to me that it is important to develop a more complete picture of the value within a degree taking into account not just economic/financial or academic value but also personal value requires recognition, as well as how this may change over time. The most informed provider of that value perspective would appear to be those with experience, graduates. Their recognition of value thus has the potential to inform both prospective and current students and institutions.

Securing evaluation over periods of time and across areas of value perception other than financial is particularly relevant when considering how economic or income data alone will be subject at certain times to life choices, which may have been made possible through obtaining a degree. For example time out of employment to raise a family, low income self-employment status during initial entrepreneurial stages, have the potential to be times when income or economic data alone would indicate little or no value in economic/financial terms, but in these instances the personal through satisfaction and academic, drawing on skills and knowledge developed during the initial degree, have the potential to be

valued extremely highly. Reducing value within a degree to economic/financial alone has not only the potential to produce a metric which is shallow, but which may actually obscure real impact.

I would argue that the graduate voice is one piece in a complex jigsaw identifying and recognising the value of a degree, but an extremely important piece because of its unique capacity to illustrate and evidence the lived experience and durability of a degree.

Chapter 4 considers the methodology underpinning this exploration of possible ways that the fullness in terms of value, articulated through the graduate voice at differing distances from the degree experience, might be researched and evaluated.

## Summary

- Established a pedagogical, theoretical basis for employing the graduate voice through experiential and peer learning
- Identified the multiple stakeholders of HE, their influence and impact
- Considered the positioning of the Graduate Voice and potential impact
- Considered risks of not researching and employing the Graduate Voice on a systematic, regular basis.

## Chapter Four: Methodology and Resulting Method

This chapter presents an outline of the methodological approach, epistemological basis for the study and theories underpinning the work. Within the chapter the primary methods of data collection through interviews and surveys are outlined, together with the primary instruments of analysis: qualitative coding and statistical analysis using SPSS. Information is given about research participants, and the chapter concludes with an outline of some limitations of the method and data, together with analysis of how these may have shaped the approach taken and subsequent outcomes.

### 4.0 Theoretical framing - introduction

Crotty rightly identified that the terminology of research literature is confusing with perspectives, paradigms, methodologies and methods “...*thrown together in grab-bag style as if they were all comparable terms.*” (Crotty, 1998:3). To reduce confusion he suggests these terms need to be seen as hierarchical steps of decision-making a researcher is required to consider and adopt in order to guide meaningful research. He omits ontology from his research process because “...*to talk about the construction of meaning [epistemology] is to talk about the construction of a meaningful reality [ontology]*” (Crotty 1998:10).

Research in its broadest form seeks to influence understanding through a process of securing evidence which reinforces or challenges paradigms (sets of basic beliefs, assumptions or propositions) an individual holds which cannot be proven to be true or false but are required to be accepted as the world view of that individual (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). For example for centuries individuals held the belief that the world was flat. Astronomers however were credited with producing evidence in the 3rd century B.C to challenge the existing paradigm. Thus it can be seen that evidenced-based exploration is a fundamental role of research. In the flat earth example astronomers adopted a positivist approach to their research – that of an absolute truth which could be proven or disproven. The elements of the research paradigm (including ontology for completeness) are therefore central to and interlinked within the research framework (Mertens,2005), influencing how the research is conducted and the also the methods used (Figure. 7). The research paradigm requires the

researcher to consider what reality is, how they and the subject/s of the research believe reality is known, and how they view evidence generated through this lens.

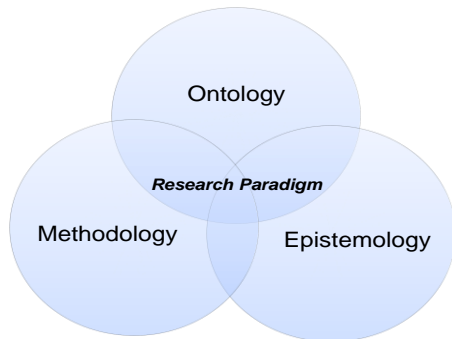


Fig.7 Venn diagram of the interlinking influences of research philosophy and process

#### 4.1 Ontological and epistemological positioning

Research paradigms have historically led researchers down delineated paths to their research methods. Guba and Lincoln (1994:105) identified four competing paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism.

Those, like the flat-earth astronomers, who consider it is possible to establish what is and is not true (Jankowicz, 2005:11) adopt the positivist approach. They favour validated 'scientific' methods and generally seek to describe and control data in what they consider a relatively objective manner (Plack, 2005). On the other hand the constructivist or interpretivist (Altheide and Johnson, 1994; Secker et al, 1995; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007:20), approach is adopted by researchers seeking to understand behaviour and how individuals construct their own realities. It is less clear cut than positivism, considering that absolute truth cannot be established but believing that it is possible to work towards identifying consensus.

Accordingly this study adopts a constructivist approach recognising that individuals continually construct the reality of their worlds, to which they respond. In this case each generation of graduates constructs a reality within the context of the society, institutions and political discourse of their generation. Each is thus constructing their own reality from their own experience. (Berger & Luckman,

1967; Kukla, 2000). This epistemology appears particularly well suited to research focused on exploring the perceived truth of an experience by those who have experienced it. It recognises that this may involve multiple realities and considers these to be socially constructed. I am not seeking to make claims about the conclusive truth of my findings, but about their indicative nature. This additionally aligns my professional philosophy as a constructivist educational developer with my identity as a researcher.

Blumer's advice for sociological researchers appears to me applicable to any researcher:

*"We can, and I think must, look upon human life as chiefly a vast interpretative process in which people, singly and collectively, guide themselves by defining the objects, events and situations which they encounter... Any scheme designed to analyze human group life in its general character has to fit this process of interpretation."* (1956:686)

Thus it can be deduced that as humans are diverse, work that seeks to explore directly with them their personal experiences and perceptions is unlikely to fit neatly into predefined categories or processes. As this work seeks individual constructions of reality based on experience it draws on the belief that knowledge is a value-laden and individually-interpreted social reality. My resulting interpretivist positioning is illustrated in diagrammatic form in line with Crotty's (1998:4) four elements of research design offered here with supporting interpretation and an overarching research paradigm (Figure 8).

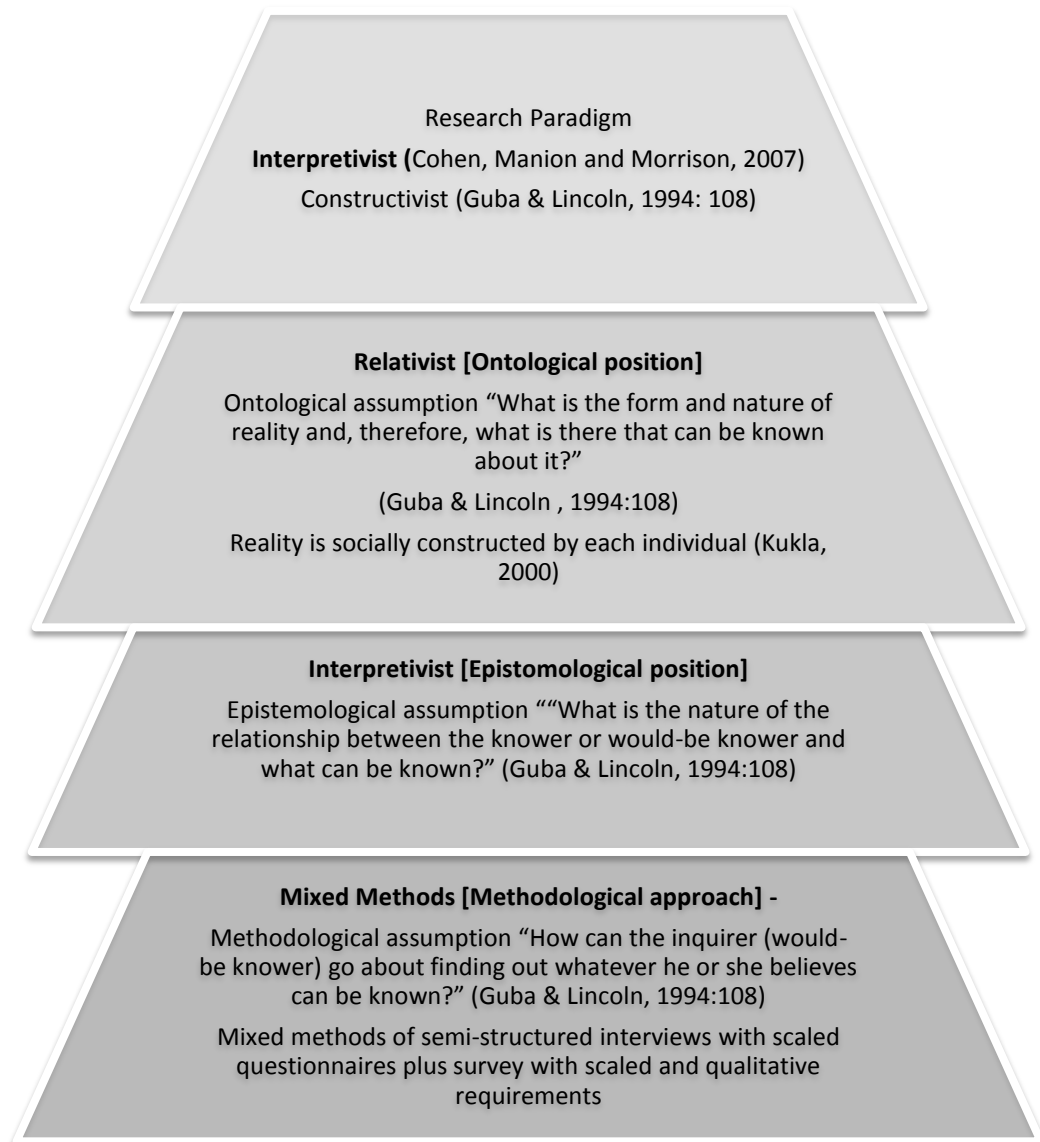


Fig.8 Study outline based on Crotty's (1998) elements of research design

## 4.2 Selection of methodology

In line with the rationale, ontological and epistemological positioning, the methodology employed is required to be inductive, specific, and for depth to seek some degree of connection between the findings at each stage. In order to explain more fully my approach, I outline why certain methods were eliminated.

In considering which methodological approaches to adopt it was pertinent to take on board Allen and Imrie's (2010) warning of potential pitfalls awaiting those reliant on government data for their work. They indicated subsequent research



may (often inadvertently) provide justification for government policies and/or practices which may not be legitimate. The statistical datasets to which Allen and Imrie (2010) refer formed the basis of several value approaches surrounding perceptions of cost-value as indicated in Chapter 1. Whilst there is no indication previous research resulted in justification for government policies or practices, it is clear the research supported the government's position on the cost-benefits of undertaking a degree. This study seeks to develop new knowledge through a research approach independent of government data.

Determining perception of value is significantly different from seeking recognition of the financial value of a degree - which can be statistically evaluated in some ways. For example, we know (ONS 2014) that in the 2012/13 academic year students beginning their studies in England and Wales could be charged up to £9,000 per annum in tuition fees. This was a significant rise on their peers from the previous academic year (2011/12) who were charged a maximum of £3,375 for the same courses. Fees had already increased from £3,000 in 2005 and from £1,000 a year when individual charges were first introduced in 1998. One crude method of calculating the financial value of a degree would be to take the earnings of a graduate at a given point and compare them with the earnings of a contemporary without a degree but with the same job. Taking the fees paid by the graduate based on the costs prevailing during their years of study, deducting bursaries or scholarships, adding any costs pertaining to loans and offsetting that cost against overall expected earnings in a lifetime would produce a figure of financial value.

Another broad-brush quantitative approach was taken by the Office for National Statistics (2014) to identify the impact of a degree on the employment prospects of the UK's 12 million graduates. Employment, unemployment and inactivity data for UK citizens were examined by highest qualification held. This indicated that graduates were more likely to be employed than other groups. Graduates in medicine or dentistry were achieving the highest average gross annual pay and highest levels of employment. These statistics can be taken as one indicator of degree value. However, they do not enable evaluation of the value perceived by the individual graduates.

Personal perception of value accrued socially, academically and personally is complex and can be recognised as only being known through individual interpretation. The very intricate composition of a degree varies by individual, course, institution and is influenced by pre, during and post-degree experiences. Thus this value is impossible to define in the same way one would determine financial value which, as we have seen, has itself been researched by employing different methods. For these reasons it can be deduced that determining perception of value demands a methodology that recognises the social complexity of value and judgments of value.

Qualitative research is more focused on linguistic interpretation, employing tools such as interviews, focus groups, case studies and observations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2005). These are considered to give broader, more in-depth insights as Geertz (1973:14) termed 'thick descriptions'.

Given the scope of the aims of the study, to establish value perceptions among graduates across decades, institutions, disciplines and drawing on individuals from diverse demographics, a case study approach was considered unsuitable for the constraint it would have imposed.

Determining and interpreting graduates' perceptions of value within their degrees is multi-faceted and individual. Therefore it is important to utilise research techniques that provide opportunities for deeper enquiry and development of understanding in the early stages of the investigation. In the early stages I sought to establish collective knowledge through individual stories, and rich descriptions within the context of narratives and/or responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This insight was utilised in later stages to identify whether the perceptions of the few were more widely recognised by participants in a larger population study.

The interpretivist approach stresses the subjectivity of meaning and prioritises reality as seen by the participants who are the subjects and objects of the research. In line with this epistemological position a flexible, participant-led approach to the data collection (semi-structured qualitative interviews initially and open text boxes within a subsequent survey) was adopted to enable participants to articulate value in their own words. This combined with a mechanism to allow

participants to control their allocation of value. These are explained in more detail in sections 4.9 (p.154) and 4.11(a) on page 157.

Qualitative research interviews are a recognised approach for interpretivist researchers and were selected as the starting point for this study due to their potential to “*get under the skin*” of participants in a way that has been recognised can deepen knowledge about them, their thoughts, emotions and behaviour (Nuttall et al., 2011:158). This is particularly useful for researchers exploring areas with which they are unfamiliar, as in this case (Matthews & Ross, 2010: 145). It provided a method of developing initial knowledge and subsidiary research questions through identification of meaning directly from individuals with experience. Qualitative research seeking participants’ lived experiences is recognised for being inductive, descriptive and sense-making (Frankel & Devers, 2000; Amaratunga et al, 2002). Therefore it was apt for this exploration of whether graduates perceive value in and from their degree experience, and to identify where they locate that value.

A combination of qualitative (subjective, complex) and quantitative (measurable) methods were adopted to combine flexibility with research depth, in what Robson (1993) called a flexible and open approach. These methods were structured in an approach Sieber (1973) indicated as particularly beneficial with one method building into and thus augmenting available interpretive data. The pros and cons of mixing, blending, and interrelating these two methods has been the subject of significant and often fierce debate in recent decades (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). When approaching ‘mixed methods’ Bryman (2006) posed a series of questions regarding the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods. Recognising the need to respond to these, each is answered sequentially in Table 2 in relation to this study.

Table 2. The multiple methods approach of this study evaluated against Bryman's (2006) guide.

Bryman (2006) questions	Responses related to this study
Are the quantitative and qualitative data collected simultaneously or sequentially? (Morgan, 1998; Morse, 1991).	The study uses both sequential and simultaneous approaches to collecting quantitative and qualitative data. Phases 1 and 2
Which has priority – the quantitative or the qualitative data? (Morgan, 1998; Morse, 1991).	This is not a straightforward evaluation to make, given that each data collection informs the other, resulting in changing priorities and balance of priorities throughout the study.
What is the function of the integration – for example, triangulation, explanation, or exploration? (Creswell, 2003; Creswell et al., 2003; Greene et al., 1989).	The function of integration in this study is to triangulate, inform and explore value perceived by participants in higher education degrees at greater depth. Phases 1, 2 and analysis of data
At what stage(s) in the research process does multi-strategy research occur? (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). (at research question formulation, data collection, analysis, or interpretation.)	The process is multi-strategy from the stage of data collection to analysis and interpretation.
Is there more than one data strand? (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). With a multi-strand study, there is more than one research method and source of data. With a mono-strand study, there is one research method and hence one source of data. However, whether a mono-strand study can genuinely be regarded as a form of mixing methods is debatable.	There are multiple methods which lead to multiple sources and strands of study. The necessity in manageable terms for this study is to focus on selecting those strands to be pursued for this study and those which require to be tackled in subsequent work.

As can be seen this study seeks to adopt

*“...increased methodological sophistication of mixed methods research in the social and behavioral sciences.”* Creswell et al (2011:2).

### 4.3 Justification of the approach adopted

Creswell (2014) highlighted the mixed methods design as a process for both collection and analysis as well as an opportunity to selectively mix qualitative and quantitative data within a single study. It is, as has been previously identified, a combination with the potential to enable more detailed analysis (Greene, Caracelli & Graham 1989, Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998). For this reason it is an approach which has been utilised in educational studies, including the longitudinal Futuretrack studies of the employment impact of higher education on employers and students. This four-year study funded by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) began in 2007/8 using surveys followed by in-depth interviews (Purcell et al, 2009; Callender & Wilkinson, 2012).

My study utilises similar mixed methods although the order of the interview/survey was reversed in order to inform initial research approaches. These methods combine in Denzin's (1978) '*between-methods triangulation*', bringing different approaches to bear on the same question. Triangulation in this context is understood as the development of convergence or corroboration of results from different methods.

The first triangulation point was previous research. An initial review of peer reviewed and grey literature, (university websites and alumni magazines), highlighted a lack of previous research exploring graduate perceptions of degree value in combined financial, personal and academic terms. McGivney's (2002) research for the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) however explored perceptions of value among adult learners. This offered a valuable starting point being strong in exploration of personal, economic and academic benefits. It formed the start of the staged triangulation for this study as illustrated (Figure 9).

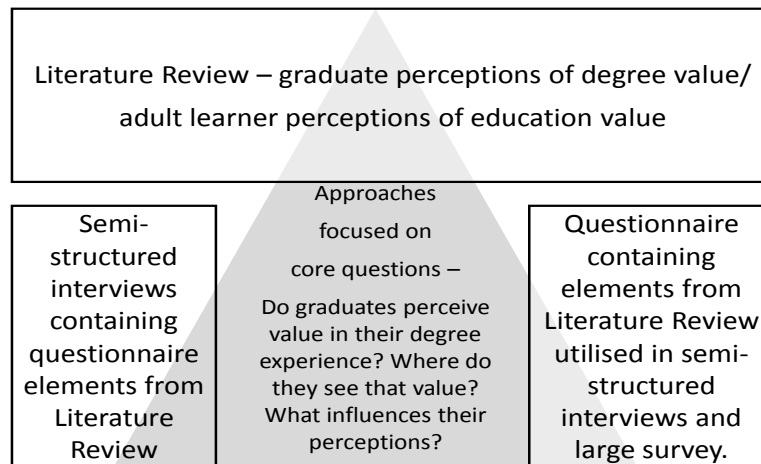


Fig.9 Triangulation as applied in this study

The approach taken aligned with the justifications identified by Greene et al's (1989:259) research into combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, namely:

**Triangulation:** data sought and analysed using more than one method which seeks convergence and corroboration and to eliminate inherent bias of a single method.

**Complementarity:** 'elaboration, enhancement, illustration, clarification of the results from one method with the results from another'

**Development:** 'seeks to use the results from one method to help develop or inform the other method, where development is broadly construed to include sampling and implementation, as well as measurement decisions'

**Initiation:** 'seeks the discovery of paradox and contradiction, new perspectives of [sic] frameworks, the recasting of questions or results from one method with questions or results from the other method'

**Expansion:** 'seeks to extend the breadth and range of enquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components'

Each data collection phase was preceded by a pilot or feasibility study, a recognised means of developing constructs, as well as testing question quality, clarity and ironing out technical issues (van Teijlingen et al 2001). The

triangulation approach taken was systematically linear, each stage informing and supporting the next.

#### 4.4 Evaluation of ontological stance

Smith considers:

*“interpretivist[s] see criteria not as abstract standards, but as an open-ended, evolving list of traits that characterize what we think research should do and be like.” (1993:153)*

Thus while the criteria for this thesis have been continually developing and evolving as the work has progressed it has been important to ensure recognition of the value, trustworthiness and authenticity of the research. Accordingly in the outcomes of this research its value in terms of credibility, transferability, usefulness and originality will be considered and Lincoln and Guba’s 1985 trustworthiness criteria together with Guba and Lincoln’s (1989a) authenticity criteria will be applied. Elements like triangulation have been criticised for leaning to positivist demands (Silverman, 2001). However triangulation was applied as has been discussed, not in a positivist manner to judge reliability but to support and inform the credibility and dependability of the research (Fig. 10).

With a background of 30 years as a journalist, the interview was a natural and automatic research response for me, however the use of the interview is justified for reasons far more valid than researcher preference. Interviews are commonplace as a method of generating and unearthing information. Briggs had estimated (1986) that 90% of social science studies used the interview as the basis for research. Thus there is well documented guidance on the issues surrounding interviews to support researchers.

Saunders et al (2003) emphasise reliability, posing the key question of whether another researcher would uncover similar results by conducting the research in the same way. Winter (2000) too links reliability to replicability. Whilst particularly apparent with the positivist paradigm, steps can and should be taken to minimise the collection of unreliable data in all research. Use of a template can give an element of consistency to interviews in terms of structure and approach should another interviewer conduct a similar study. However using exactly the same participants would be impossible as they have already experienced the questions

and as a result may respond differently, perhaps endeavouring to recall previous responses. Selecting participants of similar cultural and educational backgrounds, ages, and gender would not be guaranteed to yield the same responses due to no fault of the research tool, and the inherent differences within each individual's 'lived experience,' as well as the experience of the researcher.

Interview bias can result in invalidation or unreliable responses. Saunders et al express it as recognising “...*whether the tone, comments and non-verbal behaviour of the interviewer create bias in the way the interviewees respond to the questions being asked.*” (2003:253). Steps to eliminate bias can be taken but it is questionable whether it can ever be totally eliminated in an interview where researcher and participant hear each other's voices and view body language.

Recording interviews enables re-visiting and re-examination supporting accuracy of understanding. Additionally it allows for unconscious bias evaluation. The attitude and involvement of the interviewer, their interview technique and emphasis of questions are recognised as having a potential impact upon responses. Holstein and Gubrium advise: “*The interviewer should be disinterested and inconspicuous, like the proverbial fly on the wall.*” (2011:149). This may work as a technique capturing a moment in time, indeed possibly work alongside an observation, but equally it has the potential to fail to develop a rapport of trust between the interviewee and interviewer. Such trust can result in a deeper, more meaningful exchange of information. Accordingly I contend Charmaz (2006) is correct that the fly-on-the-wall approach has the potential to miss a significant opportunity for deeper information.

The researcher, according to Burgess “...*approaches the interview as a conversation with a purpose.*” (1984:102), as does the journalist. Researchers set out their purpose as hypotheses or research questions, to which they seek answers from primary, secondary and tertiary sources. Journalists seek answers from the same sources to questions posed by themselves or others. Journalist and academic Harcup considers:

*“I think journalists and academics alike have something to contribute to the process of understanding.”* (2009:41)



Journalists and researchers face the same pitfalls. Pseudocommunication' described by Habermas and explained by Henley and Kramarae can occur when despite interviewer and interviewee sharing a common language and possibly common experiences, they

*"...are likely to mistakenly assume that a consensus exists among them concerning the meaning of communicative behaviours. This mistaken assumption 'produces a system of reciprocal misunderstandings which are not recognised as such' or pseudocommunication." (1991:34).*

The issue of etymology was identified as an area for both discussion and a potential area of conflict or misunderstanding by both Saussure and Wittgenstein (Harris, 1988). It is succinctly illustrated, in art by Magritte (1929), and in literature by Foucault and Harkness in his translator's introduction to Foucault's *This is not a Pipe*:

*"...words do not "refer" to things themselves. Rather, they have meaning as points within the entire system that is a language..." (1983:5).*

Prior to or during research interviews pseudocommunication can result in the subject misinterpreting the aim of the interview and attempting to respond accordingly, or the researcher wrongly selecting participants for a study. This can result in invalid responses being made by subjects either inadvertently (by wrongly understanding the subject), or deliberately (in an attempt to deliver what they consider is required for whatever reason). Pseudocommunication can result in researchers' invalidly interpreting interviewees' responses. Regular checking during interview of understanding on both parts can be one way of addressing these issues. In this study validity checking was carried out by utilising this approach during the interview process as one way to ameliorate risk.

Another potential area of invalidity can be created by the interview environment. This can impact the interviewee's ability to focus and concentrate on the questions, and/or influence their response in ways which alter reliability. For example having others within earshot, particularly significant others whose opinion the interviewee considers important, may lead to unreliable and sometimes invalid responses. It is however possible to conduct a one-to-one interview in a busy environment and maintain the focus of the interviewee if there

are no significant others such as employers, peers, parents, siblings or partners whose opinions they may seek or whose presence may influence the interviewee's personally considered responses. This reduction of distraction was an approach taken throughout the one-to-one interviews.

In the journalistic arena, there is concern that letting interviewees view questions in advance whether days ahead or during the interview could lead to undesirable outcomes such as constructed answers, attempts to second guess the interviewer's desired responses, or to responses which would 'sound good' in the ears of significant others. Whilst it is perhaps impossible to achieve a totally unbiased and totally reliable response, removing as many factors which adversely influence supports the achievement of an immediate, unpremeditated response. Conversely viewing questions in advance may lead to a more considered, accurate answer than an 'off the cuff' response. I did not disclose questions prior to interview but some were posed and returned to during the interview, enabling slightly more considered responses.

It is recognised that the recall of interviewees because of memory or influences since the experience may not be a totally accurate representation of their exact degree experience. However my research for this thesis is exploring the individual's perception of their experience, from the position of hindsight as graduates and as such their recollection, however flawed from the reality, is what counts. This is an instance where maturation of opinion has the potential to put the original experience into a different context upon reflection.

Wengraf (2001) criticizes qualitative interviewers for regularly under-theorizing their data. Qualitative interviewing, he argues,

*"...assumes too easily that an interview is an unproblematic window on psychological or social realities, and that the 'information' that the interviewee gives about themselves and their world can be simply extracted and quoted, as the word of an omniscient and disinterested witness might be accepted at face-value in a law-court." (2001:1).*

In law courts there are two forms of witness to provide insight to a judge and/or a jury – the eye witness giving their recollection of events, and the expert witness

giving their perception of how the knowledge they possess applies to the given circumstances. Both can be influenced by many external and internal factors, among them the financial benefits for the 'expert witness'. It is difficult to see in light of this how Wengraf considers a witness could be considered omniscient and disinterested when their testimony may generate commercial advantage, however remote, and when their identity is apparent to all. The interviewee whose words and identity are anonymised, as in this study, appears more likely to be overt and truthful in sharing their perceptions or recollections, if only because they are not receiving public recognition or personal gain from their participation. A potential risk could be situated in them being adversely influenced by their sense of importance as an interviewee; a desire for their contribution to be useful and thus perhaps offering embellished accounts (Wetherell, 2003) .

Hammersley uses 'validity' as a synonym of 'truth':

*"An account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise."* (1992:69).

Holstein and Gubrium (2011) are more pragmatic, linking the term to comprehensible understanding in context. This should be recognised as having relevance in terms of a qualitative study in the way research is conducted and also evaluated. This is even more important in light of the strongly interpretative nature of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

## Method

### 4.5 Rationale and method design

This mixed method study was designed to triangulate and contain multiple data collection methods within each phase (Figure 10). Following an initial literature review two distinct but interlinked phases were developed each preceded by a pilot. The first took the form of semi-structured interviews with graduates. This included a questionnaire based on McGivney's (2002) peer reviewed value work with adult learners, the reasons for which this was selected appear on p.56. The development of Phase 2 drew on the McGivney-based questionnaire and initial analysis of responses from graduates in Phase 1.

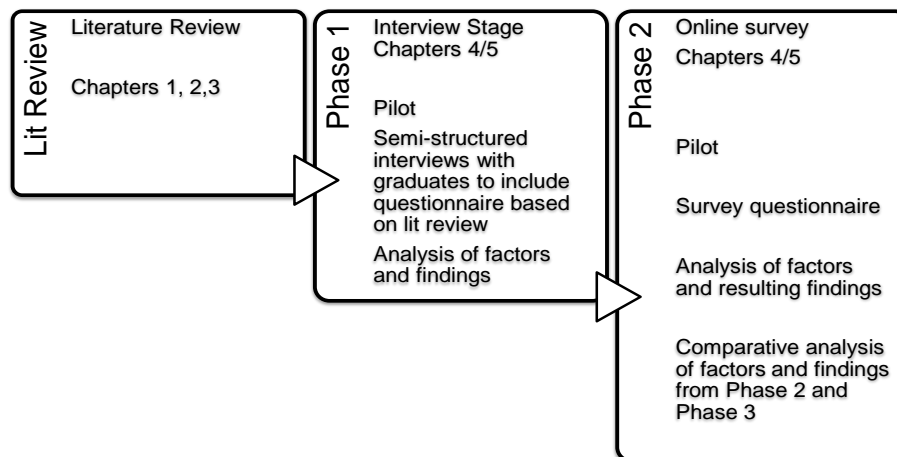


Fig.10. Overview of study design

### 4.6 Ethics

Ethical clearance was sought and obtained through the Research Institute and University of Bedfordshire's ethics committees prior to research commencement. The nature of the study involved no vulnerable individuals or children. All participants were adults (graduates) who were provided prior to involvement with details of the research aims and a consent form agreed as part of the study's ethical clearance (Appendix 1). Participants were considered capable of making a free and informed decision. No interview was conducted without the aims being

read and a consent form signed by each interviewee to indicate their 'informed consent' (British Psychological Society, 2009). All interviews were recorded with participants' agreement, recordings were erased after transcription and transcriptions anonymised on a password protected computer.

The Phase 2 online questionnaire contained an introductory screen with information about the purpose of the survey, a dynamic email link to the researcher's university email address, a contact for the lead supervisor, and information about participant rights. All participants were required to be degree-educated adults and advised they would be considered to have given informed consent when they clicked through to the survey after reading the introduction.

Whilst it is acceptable not to ask for an explicit statement of informed consent in cases when particular care is taken to anonymise data, the additional consent requirement was specifically included in an attempt to mitigate the potential for the 'observer effect'. By articulating anonymity the potential for participants to frame their responses to achieve a particular impression may be mitigated. All participants were assured of anonymity in the thesis and any related publications. In accordance with Internet mediated research guidelines the same ethical rigour was applied to communication, methods, results and evaluation for research online and conducted in person.

No inducements were offered or coercion used to achieve participation. All interviews were completed between December 2011 and January 2012. Participants were free to withdraw at any time within the six months following their interview without being asked to provide a reason for withdrawal. All interviews were tagged with the 6-digit date of birth and initials of the participant to identify the material to be removed. Online material was collated between 25 July 2013 and 28 October 2013. This material was identified for removal by IP addresses. No requests for withdrawal of interviews or online contributed data were received within the six-month period.

The internet was used as a cost-effective and potentially wide-reaching distribution mechanism for the online survey, in line with ethical guidance for social researchers (BPS 2009; Orton-Johnson, 2010).. No material was

generated via discussion boards or forums. Using social media communities to disseminate a link to an electronic questionnaire rather than posting a questionnaire directly online added additional security to protect participant anonymity, unlike an email survey. The link was not connected to cookies or invasive software.

Ethical issues particular to web-based questionnaires considered and addressed in this study included reducing the capacity for participants to complete the questionnaire multiple times by enabling a single internet protocol address per response; checking operation of the questionnaire on different browsers and recognition of selection bias. It was recognised that participants would be self-selecting, and that possibly only the satisfied would respond. It was also possible that some hoax responses would be recorded, but this was considered as possible with any form of questionnaire or indeed qualitative data collection (Orton-Johnson, 2010). The first question filtered out respondents without a first (undergraduate) degree. The snowballing method of distribution was one route to targeting the sought population as those disseminating would generally have contact with other graduates. This was considered the most geographically effective method, offering the opportunity to obtain a wider spread of responses, particularly valuable for reaching international students who study first degrees in the UK but return to their home countries on graduation. Snowball sampling is a recognised method when using social media as a way of achieving a sample involving individuals from a particular population.

The length of time needed to complete the questionnaire was identified and a mechanism put in place to identify rapidly completed responses. The intention was to delete these as carrying the risk of being potential hoax responses. However none were identified. Results received were all electronically recorded by time, computer location and duration of survey. Whilst not total proof of the integrity of the data, it is evidence of entries from different locations and some measure of the legitimacy of the data obtained.

All information was gathered and stored in line with the UK Social Policy Association's ethical guidelines (2009).

## 4.7 Data collection

As outlined, the Phase 1 interviews were designed to establish correlation from a small data set with outcomes of previous peer reviewed studies (McGivney, 2002; Brooks & Everett, 2009) and identify allocations of perception of value together with key factors among a population recognised as self-selecting.

Phase 2 was designed to determine whether the findings and factors of Phase 1 were replicated within a larger population study, and to identify whether within a larger data set additional factors or findings were apparent which shed light on the research question and objectives.

## 4.8 Participant recruitment, pilots, demographics

### Phase 1 interviews

Following requests for graduate participants via LinkedIn<sup>22</sup> 13 graduates came forward for interview. Four others were contacted through word of mouth to achieve a stratified sample of ethnicity, gender, institutions and mode of study (full or part-time) in higher education over the past 35 years. No distance learners or unemployed graduates were involved at this stage of the research. As one research objective was to identify how graduate perceptions of value reflected or aligned with HE policy emphasising the economic and financial benefits of a degree, having employed graduates was considered to enable this alignment to be explored more effectively than would be the situation with unemployed graduates.

Additional respondent characteristics sought included original motivation to undertake a degree, age at degree commencement, distance from graduation, institution, subject discipline (utilising Biglan's categories, 1973) and degree classification. Interviewees came from varied careers including a doctor, teacher, nurse, administrator and receptionist. None of the participants were former students of, or related to the researcher. Of the original 17 interviewees, one withdrew prior to interview due to bereavement, and one was rejected after failing

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<sup>22</sup> LinkedIn is an online social media site with a focus on professional networking.

to produce verifiable evidence of a degree. The demographics of these interviewees appear in outline in Table 3 and in detail in Appendix 9.

Individual interviews were conducted as a preferred method over focus groups. Whilst popular with many researchers, focus groups were considered in this instance difficult to arrange, manage and evaluate. In terms of arrangement the research sought opinions from a range of individuals from different institutions. In practical terms getting these people together would be more complex and costly than arranging for one researcher to move around them. Management of focus groups requires real expertise to achieve meaningful results (Reed & Roskell Payton, 1997). Dominant individuals and a propensity for resulting topics to be explored in depth by an inexperienced researcher focusing on a single participant at a time can be problematic for data collection and analysis. Finally, the issue in terms of both collection and analysis of expressed opinions can be open to issues of influence. In this case securing individual perceptions of value could be adversely affected in a group where individuals would be drawn from different institutions. Graduates might have been inclined to express what they considered the perspectives of 'their institution' rather than their own individual perception, or to adopt 'posturing'. This would raise questions of validity indicated by Nyamathi and Shuler as the *"degree to which a procedure really measures what it is supposed to measure."* (1990:1284).



Table 3: Demographics of interviewees in Phase 1: n= 15

Demographics	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9	A10	A11	A12	A13	A14	A15
gender	M	m	m	f	m	f	f	f	m	m	m	f	f	m	m
age at entry	19	18	19	19	21	19	39	18	28	18	25	18	18	18	18
educational background	grammar	grammar	state wp	state	state	state	state no A level	state	state no A level	state	state	state	state	state	state
distance from graduation in years	10	18	5	10	15	1	4	28	9	4	17	6	4	31	33
ethnicity	white brit	white brit	brit indian	white brit	white brit	white europ	white brit	white brit	white brit	eurasian brit	black british	white brit	white brit	white brit	white brit
first generation	no mother	yes	no elder sibling	no -both	yes	no mother	yes	no mother	yes	yes	No younger sibling	yes	yes -cousins	yes	no elder sibling
degree essential to career goals	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x
choice of institution	clear	2	2	Moved to	Moved to	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
institution	post 92	post 92	post 92	post 92	post 92	post 92	post 92	Russell Group	post 92	Russell Group	post 92	pre 92	post 92	pre 92	post 92

In Phase 1 interviewees were invited to change or amend questions, and to discuss areas they considered ambiguous, adding richness. Complexities of interpreting concepts were discussed to seek conditions for *‘possible*

*understanding'* (Habermas, 1971) on the assumption that responses were as truthful and honest as possible. These discussions resulted in some participant-led changes, amendments and additions to the in-interview questionnaire (Appendix 2). The aim was to seek each individual's value perceptions through interpretation, not to determine how their perception aligned with that of the interviewer, or other interviewees, institutional management or political policy. For an individual to perceive individual value it must be value that they personally determine and consider they have experienced, not an interpretation imposed upon them. Equally, individuals cannot comment on value perceived by others. However it should be recognised that external pressures including parental or employer expectations may influence an individual's perceptions of degree value and thus during the interview influencing factors were discussed and identified.

Graduates were asked to focus on perceptions of value they considered they had experienced, not an interpretation imposed upon them by the researcher. Responses were free as in the coded transcript example (Appendix 3). This is an important distinction and interpreting their responses correctly required clear understanding of the fluid and responsive meaning of language. During the interviews meaning and understanding was checked and re-checked.

### **Phase 2 survey**

Self-selection can be a limitation of online survey research (Stanton, 1998; Witmer et al, 1999; Thompson et al, 2003). This was considered less likely to be an issue in this study as the population being approached are generally digitally aware with Internet access. Research indicated that the target audience of graduates were particularly responsive users of social media. Ofcom (2012) data indicated eight out of ten UK adults had access to the Internet in the first quarter of that year and fifty per cent of those households likely to be graduates (higher, intermediate and/or early professionals/managers) accessed social networking.

The questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics™ software which had the additional advantage of enabling easy data exportation into SPSS (Field, 2013) for analysis.

## 4.9 Specific data collection techniques employed

Concept mapping, a research technique employed by sociological and educational researchers in different ways was utilised as the basis for the interviews. Kandiko, Hay and Weller, (2013) asked students to map areas of worth within higher education whilst O'Neill and Mansaray (2012), and Haaken and O'Neill (2014) asked people living on the streets to literally map their lived environment.

A concept map for the interviews (Appendix 4) was developed as a result of information from the literature review and enhanced during the pilot interview. No other contribution or data from the pilot interview was included within the analysis. Each interview was conducted individually with the concept map being used to generate order, logical progression and a comparative element of responses. It created a framework of open and closed questions, enabling a replicable but flexible structure to build around the personal, academic and economic areas of an individual's degree experience. This enabled consistency of questioning across the interviews whilst simultaneously delivering opportunities for participants to share a full picture of their individual perceptions in and around the various prompts.

Developing and utilising the mapping structure enabled all areas to be covered and checked during the interview, without restricting flow or direction. The interviewee was free to make the connections they chose. The interview recordings indicated clearly that each interviewee's recollections flowed in slightly different ways through the chronology of pre, during and post-degree experience before moving on to an attribution of proportion of value (covered in detail in 4.10), the questionnaire and a concluding main value question.

The questionnaire based on the McGivney research (Appendix 2) was introduced into interviews initially as a method of developing the core of the Phase 2 survey. It used the interview context to evaluate and identify areas of ambiguity, concern or paucity of content. During the course of the interviews it was expanded, amplified and amended through interviewee input to become an important element of the study. Appendix 5 shows how Phase 1 informed the Phase 2 survey.

A deliberate decision was taken to move away from McGivney's grouping of elements within set areas, but to use these elements in a random format. Randomisation, separating connected concepts like self-worth, self-esteem and personal satisfaction was employed to reduce the potential risk of response bias in both phases. Indeed 12 interviewees commented that the the randomised format required them consider each question in turn.

Introducing the questionnaire element towards the end of the interview process, watching and questioning when interviewees paused, hesitated or revoked initial decisions enabled a greater clarity of understanding to be achieved. It also created a form of triangulation as to how responses to the questionnaire related to earlier answers. In some cases it was at this point that interviewees reflected on how they considered their own earlier perceptions of value had been inaccurate or false, and how deeper reflection had led to them re-evaluating their perception of value. Nine of the 15 interviewees commented that they believed their initial response to the question of value altered during the course of their interview. Seven said the reflective process had strengthened their perception of value, whilst two others said their perception of value diminished as a result of revisiting and reflecting upon the experience.

#### **4.10 Pilots**

The pilot research stages were designed to test question validity, comprehension, identify areas of ambiguity, and identify logistical problems of including questions in certain orders, or in the case of the interviews inclusion of the questionnaire. They additionally helped identify mechanical issues with recording interviews and question-routing issues with the online survey. No pilot data was included in the data for final analysis.

The Phase 1 interview pilot involved a male science degree graduate 31 years from his degree experience at the time of interview. His interview lasted 90 minutes, was conducted in his home, recorded with his permission and transcribed by me within 48-hours.

The draft Phase 2 survey was piloted with 10 graduate participants known to me. Each went online via a link emailed to them and completed the questionnaire as indicated as sound practice (Schmidt 1997). They then submitted their evaluation of the questions by email and I had the opportunity to engage in discussion with them. Their input supported development of the Phase 2 survey (Appendix 6).

#### 4.11 Specific tools developed for this study

The research was designed to enable individual perceptions to be identified and elements of these to be detailed for analysis as shown in the flow chart below (Figure 11). This resulted in the development of graduate-led perception evaluation tools to encourage graduates to articulate value within existing parameters.

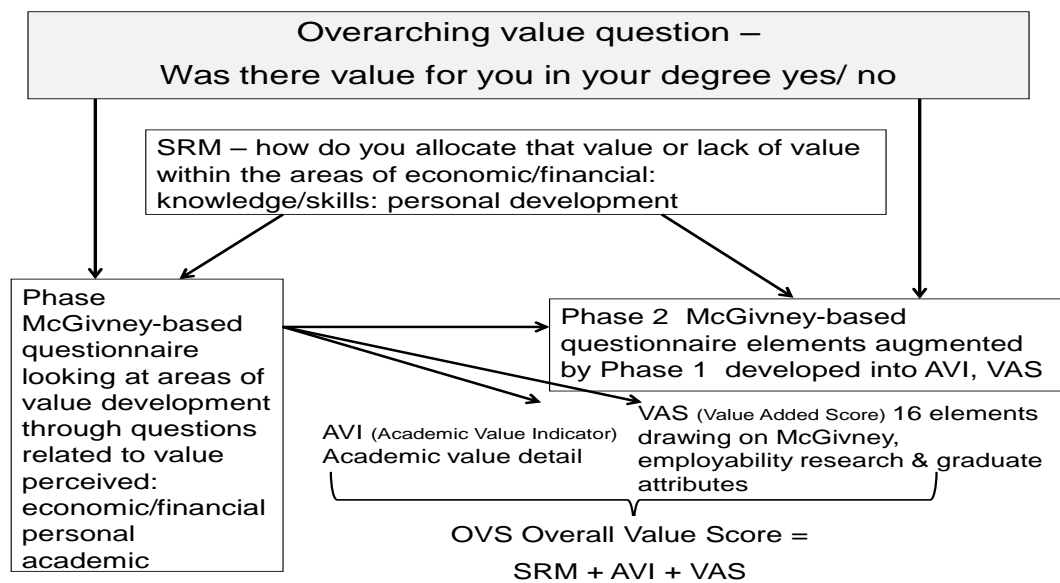


Fig.11. Tools developed for this study to identify graduate perceptions of value

These tools are explained below:

#### **(a) Self-Reported Measurement of Value Weighting [SRM]**

Towards the end of the pilot interview, whilst discussing how overall value could be perceived, the pilot interviewee sought a way of articulating the proportional elements of his perceived degree value. The resulting self-reported measurement of value weighting (hereafter referred to as SRM and illustrated in Figure 12) indicated personal attribution of value across the three main areas identified by previous research (Chapter 1).

The SRM resulted from participants' responses to the following question:

*Q. If you were to divide your entire degree experience allocating a percentage value to each of the following how would you make that division? Totals normally amount to 100% - the value of an entire experience, but if you wish to indicate lower responses please do this in the comment box beneath each area for you to use if you wish to add further comments or explain your response. Financial advantages*

*Personal development*

*Knowledge skills development*

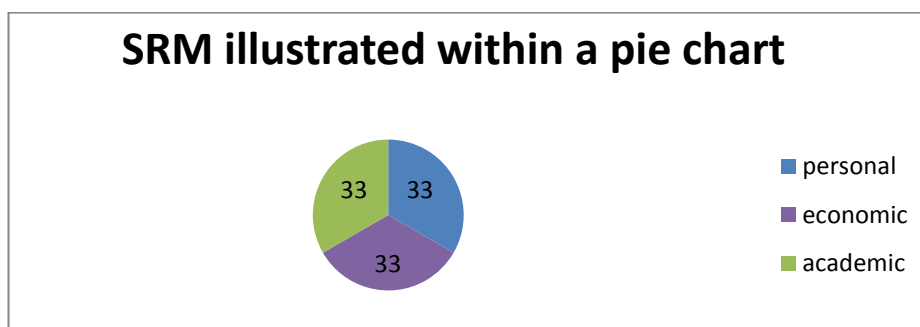


Fig 12. SRM illustrated within a pie chart

Whilst valuable as an indicator of individual perception it is recognised that the SRM is subjective and cannot be used as a comparison of scale. Thus, it gives an opportunity for Participant Y to demonstrate that they consider one area to be 50% of the overall value they consider they have gained through their degree, it should be recognised that Participant X's 50% allocation may not equate to the same as Y's. It does however provide a 'gut reaction' instant response in a similar although slightly more detailed manner as that graduates provide when asked by prospective students or others whether they feel their degree has been of value.

Seeing the entire degree experience as a whole and allocating value within that was a non-scientific but practical approach all interviewees adopted without question. It was also taken up by most participants in Phase 2 although three commented that they found it difficult to understand. Two interviewees commented: *"It's a really useful way of looking at it"*, and, *"I never thought of it like that before, but those were the three main parts of my degree."* The apportioning or allocation of value to the whole gave control of that allocation to the interviewee. Their resulting SRM is their own evaluation, (positive or negative) based on personal experience.

As a methodological tool to develop consideration by respondents, whilst not one which appears to have been used previously, this division of experience has similarities to the contextual mind mapping approaches of Kandiko et al (2013) where respondents delineated the approach and weighting of their responses. This tool exemplifies the importance of individual experience on which this study is based, exploring the value perceptions of interviewees through their own experiences, identifying similarities or differences between the attribution and articulation of value arising and factors of influence.

#### **(b) Academic Value Indicator [AVI]**

The AVI scale was employed during Phase 2 to provide additional objective detail in terms of academic value recognition. During Phase 1 interviewees, utilising prompts including the McGivney-based questionnaire identified ten elements they considered directly related to the academic experience within their degrees. The AVI was assessed from responses to these questions (Figure 13).

- Q. Thinking about your academic learning during your degree – how do you feel it added value to you? (Please indicate all which apply)*
- 1. Subject knowledge*
  - 2. Approaches to problem solving, research, evaluation*
  - 3. Practical skills related to your subject*
  - 4. Improved communication abilities*
  - 5. Ability to work in a team*
  - 6. Ability to work on your own*
  - 7. Ability to learn from different situations, different tasks*
  - 8. Ability to learn from your mistakes*
  - 9. Leadership skills*
  - 10. Added no value.*

Fig. 13. Ten elements of the Academic Value Indicator

### **(c) Value Added Score [VAS]**

The Phase 2 Value Added Score was the sum of 16 elements drawing on McGivney research and employability data from research (Brown et al, 2011: CBI/Pearson, 2014) identifying expected advantages of a graduate and graduate attribute data.

These 16 elements (Figure 14) were evaluated using a 5-point Likert interval scale anchored at 'no value' to 'immense value'. These were items identified from the interviews as occurring in various places during the degree experience, both academic and extra/co-curricular.

*Q. In which ways do you consider your first degree experience added value to you [1 \* indicates no value, 2 \*\* a little value, 3 \*\*\* some value, 4 \*\*\*\* considerable value, 5 \*\*\*\*\* immense value]*

1. *Written communication*
2. *Self-discipline*
3. *Self confidence*
4. *Ability to work on my own*
5. *Team/group working skills*
6. *Improving social skills*
7. *Tolerance of others*
8. *Knowledge of my own capabilities*
9. *Sense of self worth*
10. *Improved understanding of others*
11. *Ability to shoulder responsibility*
12. *Self esteem*
13. *Political awareness*
14. *Awareness of new opportunities*
15. *Spoken communication*
16. *Presentation skills*

Fig.14. The elements constituting the VAS (Value Added Score)

### **(d) Overall Value Score [OVS ]**

The Overall Value Score [OVS] was developed for use in Phase 2 to collate individual responses to the SRM, AVI and VAS.



#### 4.12 Phase 2 design process

The aims of Phase 2 were determined from the research question (what, if any value graduates perceived in their undergraduate degree experience), influencing factors and outcomes of the Phase 1 interviews. From the interviews it appeared important to identify basic demographic data of gender, age at entry, institution, and classification but also to seek motivation, working to earn during study, placements and accommodation during degree as well as perception and value allocation.

There are specific areas where the quality of the research approach and outcomes should be explored. The Phase 2 questions, the ways in which these were framed and the results analysed and interpreted will be systematically addressed.

##### **Framing of questions**

Questions were structured to ask demographic information first, before moving into perception with a series of prompts which enabled recording of value from none to considerable. Framing of questions was constrained by awareness of the overall length of the questionnaire and the impact of its length on respondents. The final length of 38 questions, three of which had constituent parts requiring multiple answers (SRM, VAS & AVI) may have impacted respondents' completion consistency. Some participants withdrew part way through, and others chose not to answer all elements. Had there been no restrictions, some questions would have benefited from more detailed additional elements to add to their validity. For example the question surrounding personal independence, whilst important to know whether graduates saw this as a value of their degree or not, could relate to academic, personal and financial aspects of independence.

##### **Analysis**

All interview responses were coded initially into word clouds to identify strong themes and similarities of language. These were then thematically coded using NVivo software to identify perception variables and arising themes. These (including amendments/additions made to the McGivney questionnaire, observations from the supervisory team, the qualitative pilot and Phase 1

interviewees), informed the development of the subsequent Phase 2 questionnaire (Appendix 2).

Having secured data, a concern about inadvertently devaluing it by the manner of their coding approach may be inevitable for all but the most experienced of researchers. Reliability and independence of the interpretative coding of the content of the interview must be apparent and transparent.

Whilst it may sound like stating the obvious, it is essential for the validity of the research to code what is within the content, rather than what the researcher wants or hopes is there (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). The content should dictate the coding frame, rather than being shoe-horned consciously or unconsciously into an inappropriate form that could potentially lead to distortion and misinformation. Baudrillard warned of the dangers particularly apparent in 21st century society where increasing information bombards researcher and interviewees alike: *"We live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning."* (1994:79). The need to determine genuine meaning from a sea of information is fundamental to research.

Despite utilising NVivo(version 10), a qualitative software package with the intention of making the analysis of the data visible, it is recognised that this in itself cannot be a guarantee of transparency, and indeed the coding identified multiple potential factors which threatened to cloud the message of the data. Johnson's (2006) suggestion that researchers should be aware of the impact of such software on their methods of analysing data, echoes Kaplan's law of the instrument: *"Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he runs into needs pounding."* (1964:28).

Whilst there is value in utilising technology to classify and identify, it is important to recognise the importance of the researcher as interpreter of the data. Heidegger (1927) highlighted the shared aspects of language and in this case interviewer and interviewee used language requiring interpretation. However sophisticated the software package employed, context, meaning, location of key words or phrases, pauses and accompanying expressions have the potential, if interpreted correctly, to deliver additional depth and meaning. For example the

use of the word 'think' was in some cases an indicator of a moment of reflective consideration (*'If I think back...'*), a positive memory of degree experience (*'I think I did actually benefit more out of the degree experience...'*) or a perception of value (*'I came out of the experience better able to think more intelligently than when I arrived'*) being indicative examples. It is thus apparent for the researcher to recognize context and analyse different interpretations in order to fully appreciate the data provided by the interviewee.

The initial tag cloud for all interviews as a form of initial content analysis within written or oral research material is descriptive rather than explanatory. Visualising analysis can be useful and together with the essential structured questions, delivered an initial abstract strand for categorisation. This also enabled an element of quality control and a guard against contamination by researcher bias or inefficiency of interview evidence. The intention was to visibly maintain the authenticity of the original data throughout the interpretive process, so meaning could be seen to stem from the participants' evaluation of their experiences.

All interviews were conducted over a seven week period. Each was recorded with the interviewees' permission and transcribed by me within a 48-hour period of the interview. Personally transcribing them supported greater familiarity and understanding of the data which was invaluable when it came to coding.

Each interview was coded separately, with connections identified only at the end of the process. This led to analytical categories appearing which were not mutually exclusive but reflected across the overall sample. It enabled comparison of the content of one interview with another on the same topic, but also made it possible to summarise results from all interviews on a given topic by showing frequency of the perceptions or information shared by the interviewees.

The first attempt at generating pattern codings utilised Lofland's (1971: 14-15) social phenomena classifications of Acts, Activities, Meanings, Participation, Relationships and Settings. This was discarded as unsatisfactory in this instance after a trial with a risk that enforcing these classifications across the content had the potential to result in data distortion. The second attempt looked at Bourdieu's categorisation of capital, while the third, adopted, focused around identifying

whether the patterns aligned with the areas previously defined by peer-reviewed research of personal, academic and economic/financial.

Some coding categories such as degree classification require no definition. Apparently familiar concepts can cause problems for unwary researchers as earlier identified by pseudocommunication. Careful interpretation is required to ensure reliability, and this means each interviewee's responses must relate directly in meaning and concept to others to which they are aligned. For this reason the interview coding used the form of the questionnaire as its structure, as ambiguity and meaning had been explored with each interviewee in-depth and definitions for each term developed, to ensure whilst responses may vary, there was parity in their initial starting points. This also enabled additional codes to be added as interviews highlighted new areas for inclusion. Initial codes were grouped into higher level personal, academic and economic categories which informed Phase 2 through the Academic Value Indicator and Value Added Score.

### **Phase 1 questionnaire analysis**

The development of the specific tools related to this study stemmed from the clear indication during Phase 1 data collection that interviewees identified areas of value beyond an academic/economic binary. The personal development area was seen to be important to interviewees and within this category they included areas of character and attitude development expressed in social interactions, independence, personal confidence, new networks social and professional, self-worth, and a sense of personal achievement.

The initial questionnaire was in greyscale. Colour was introduced after several interviewees requested an easier way to see at a glance which side of the form related to a positive (green) response, and which to a negative (red). No one interviewed revealed a difficulty with this format.

Questionnaire changes identified and trialled during Phase 1 continued until the seventh interviewee after which time a stability was achieved with format and content (shown in Appendix 2). The key changes were:

- Expansion of personal satisfaction to read 'A sense of personal satisfaction'

- Identification of key values arising and academic values which formed the Value Added Score and Academic Value Measurement.
- Opportunities to determine negatives within the personal concepts such as self-confidence, self-worth or self-esteem were requested by those who felt it was important to have the opportunity to reflect how their degree experience had negatively affected them.

Changes suggested by the majority were seen by the researcher as constructive and valid and adopted in Phase 2.

### **Phase 2 data analysis**

Phase 2 was informed by three main sources: the questionnaire based on the McGivney research which was piloted, tested and adapted within the Phase 1; research surrounding employability and graduate attributes; and the outcomes of the qualitative research interviews which emerged from coding.

The number of variables and combinations arising meant that achieving statistical certainty was difficult. Whilst a greater focus on one or two variables could have enabled more meaningful data which in turn could have generated more significant findings, it would have negated a significant value of this study which is the breadth it indicates. Knowing that graduate value is multifaceted and influenced by a significant number of factors prevents over-simplified evaluation.

### **Statistical Analysis**

The software package SPSS version 22 was employed for detailed analysis, the results of which appear within Part B of this chapter.

## **4.14 Research Questions**

The research questions sought to understand where graduates perceived individual accrued value (direct variable) from their degree experience and how they allocated that value. For this purpose three areas of the questionnaire were analysed to identify responses related to overall value, academic value and allocated value as well as propensity to recommend. Likert responses enabled the use of non-parametric tests, differing depending on the type of response of

the independent variable. These included a Mann-Whitney and a Kruskal-Wallis to examine differences in groups of responses, and a Spearman's test to explore associations (Hinton, McMurray & Brownlow 2014).

#### **4.15 Management of limitations**

In terms of distribution and management of responses, not using random sampling techniques meant it was difficult to achieve outcomes related to specific populations or universities. The non-random sample achieved effectively a biased sample because it is not possible to know if the individuals responding are systematically different from the population of that nation, university, degree course etc. A systematic sampling with alumni from specific institutions in specific years and courses would be needed to generate a valid sample across that graduate population. This however would lead to a different study than the one sought here. However one alternative would have been to focus on specific institutions, perhaps two or three and request distribution of the survey link via email to those listed on their alumni database. This though had the potential risk of reaching only those satisfied with their institution enough to sign up to the alumni association. Additionally four alumni departments approached refused such a request, saying they monitored carefully the material they sent to their alumni to avoid the possibility that this group, regularly approached for requests to support the institution in various ways, might suffer survey fatigue which could adversely affect institutional approaches.

Participants in Phase 2 were limited to those using particular areas of social media, in particular LinkedIn and Twitter. This may have led to a dominance of certain institutions appearing over others as the social network of one institution may have dominance within the initial network. However a range of responses was evident. This has value identifying whether factors are common to a wider population but makes determining specific value within single institutions ineffective.

One potential concern of using social media was selection bias, that the survey would be completed by colleagues on only the researchers' networks who may work for or might have particular vested interest in reflecting the value of HE. In

an attempt to avoid selection bias, HE-specific mailing lists were avoided, and the link distributed via four different users only one of whom was working within HE. It was then snowballed by participants achieving 328 responses.

Fears of only satisfied graduates responding were not proven although only seven participants considered there was no value to themselves within their degree. There is the additional question of whether once an individual has invested three years or more of their lives in achieving something they will automatically be inclined to value that experience, particularly if only being asked in outline.

Giving respondents the opportunity to pause and return may have been problematic despite being recommended by the pilot.

Ethical issues particular to web-based questionnaires which were considered and addressed included the capacity for participants to complete the questionnaire multiple times leading to influenced results (they were limited to a single access completion); checking operation of the questionnaire on different browsers (for compatibility, in order to prevent respondents being limited only to those using a certain browsers); and recognition of selection bias (addressed previously in this section).

It is important to recognise and understand research study limitations. Limitations have been addressed as they arose within this chapter, but this section provides an important opportunity to answer how the data collection could be improved if conducting a similar study in the future.

It would also seem sensible to be aware and sensitive to the risk that this approach of one phase of data feeding into the other might encourage alignment of material in ways which may cause distortion.

The study does not reflect a statistically representative sample of alumni. Because of this results should not be used to generalize about the alumni population, but can be used as a reflection of the sample under consideration. Achieving contact with alumni through alumni associations may be a targeted route to achieving higher engagement representative of an institution thus

reflecting specific messages in terms of the value of undertaking and achieving degree at that particular institution. However the random approach adopted has less risk of manipulation of results that could result from targeted distribution.

The need to develop a questionnaire of sufficient length to understand the demographics, perceptions and experience of the respondent whilst not so long that respondents lost interest was a challenge. In retrospect it could have been more helpful to focus on a single area of value and explore this in greater depth but that would have reduced the capacity of the study to inform on a broad base.

Participants were given the option to omit questions which resulted in missing data. Trying to cover a significant number of variables resulted in potentially broad questions which may or may not be indicative of variable impact on the outcome of value perception.

The question remains as to whether the size of the sample enables inferences to be drawn from the collected data. However, despite being drawn from a geographically and institutionally diverse population the data collated appears to echo many of the value variables identified by the qualitative interviewees and aligns in some places with previous research as identified in Chapter Five. As such it appears to have a breadth of relevance rather than being a statistical probability indicator, and it is in this that the value of this study lies, just as Yorke (2014) indicated was the case with his exploratory studies for the 'student belongingness' project.

Whilst this was a stratified sample of graduates (as outlined in 4.8), it is important to recognise retrospective bias, as well as the fact that all graduates were employed. The lack of unemployed participants and participants who considered they had gained no value from their degree can be considered a limitation in Phase 1. However the findings from Phase 2 indicated responses from unemployed graduates although responses were small in number (n=7).

All responses should be recognised in the context of having been given by achievers. These are individuals who have attained their goal, whether at the level they desired or not and were all employed. As such they may be subject to



Lewis's version of the dispositional theory of value (1989), that because they have achieved their goal, individuals are then disposed to value it less than they would have done before achievement.

The broad categories of personal, academic and economic/financial values identified in previous studies (Caul, 1993) and grounded in the interviews of Phase 1 are complex areas. It should be recognised, as Phase 1 interviewees did, that personal can encompass self-identity, personal skills development and indeed social aspects of undergraduate life. Whilst each is equally valid for the individual it is important to ensure that the scope of academic is definite and not overlapping with academic or economic value areas. Elements such as teamwork may appear in personal but must also be allocated within academic to ensure clarity of understanding the allocated response.

## Summary

This chapter has detailed:

- the philosophical constructivist approach which led to the mixed method approach to methodology
- an outline of the multiple data collection techniques employed involving both in-depth semi-structured interviews and a larger scale online survey of graduates.
- the various strategies employed to obtain and review internal and external validity, specifically triangulation (Denzin, 1994) and complementarity across and development between methods (Greene et al, 1989).

## Chapter Five: Research findings into graduate perceptions of value

This chapter presents the research findings in two parts. These reflect the chronological structure of the research undertaken, identifying how the results of one part changed, informed and fed into the next to inform the study.

### Part A - Phase 1 - Interviews

Part A explores how the pilot interviewee and subsequent 15 interviewees identified their perceptions of value; influencing factors; value allocation and the ways they considered the question of value of their degree at their differing distances from graduation.

This part also shows how graduate interviewees' responses shed light on both the research question '*What is the value of a degree from the graduate perspective?*' and the resulting research objectives as listed below:

- Establish common perceptions of value or lack of value identified by graduates of undergraduate university degrees.
- Establish the factors influencing or potentially influencing graduate perceptions of value within their university degree experience.
- Identify how value perceived within these graduate perceptions reflects or aligns with HE policy.

### 5.0 Influence of pilot on study direction

The approach to and purpose of the pilot interview was outlined in 4.10.

Factors identified within the pilot as having impact upon value perception of this individual's overall degree experience included entry motivation to study, degree duration, working for money whilst a student, entry into an institution which was his first choice, final classification, employment history since graduation and employment status at time of the interview.

The McGivney-based questionnaire was used and considered by the interviewee to be a useful method of evaluating multiple areas in a focused manner. It

became a discussion prompt in terms of terminology and understanding for the researcher as to how the interviewee was interpreting terms such as 'value,' 'tolerance' and 'self-criticality'. As discussed (Chapter Four) this evidenced the theoretical understanding (Harkness, 1983; Harris, 1988; Henley & Kramarae, 1991) that language and meaning can vary in intensity and depth from individual to individual. Language applied to a degree experience is subject to multiple meanings and different interpretations in the same way as siblings within a family have shared experiences that they may view from different perspectives. These perspectives and influences therefore lead each to interpret language, often shared language, differently because of age, personalities and differing external influences. Thus instead of individual linguistic interpretation being considered a stumbling block, in this study the process was inverted through use of the questionnaire to become prompts to elicit richer personal definitions. Whilst experience and language may be shared, the interpretation and weighting was recognised as individual. Thus it became the interviewees' interpretation of 'value', 'tolerance' and 'self-criticality' which they applied to their own degree experiences. Some of these may be shared interpretations of a shared experience, others may be individual.

The pilot interview informed the subsequent survey element and interviews as follows:

- A chronological question flow was found effective - pre, during and post degree.
- The Likert-style questionnaire based on the McGivney research (2002) was amended post-pilot to include additional questions (Appendix 2) and positioned to follow the semi-structured questions.
- A final open text question was included asking the single most valuable element of degree if not already articulated. This followed the questionnaire.
- Audio recording was maintained during completion of the questionnaire to capture observations.
- The pilot interviewee's response as to how he viewed the academic, economic and personal identified from the literature review within his degree, that he saw his degree as a single 100% experience divided into academic, economic and personal was adopted as the Self-Reported

Measurement of Value Weighting [SRM]<sup>23</sup> to seek participants' reflective responses to this approach and to test whether others perceived value this way.

## 5.1 Graduate interviews, individual and collective findings

As outlined in Chapter 4, Phase 1 collected data through 15 semi-structured graduate interviews. Each incorporated a small scale questionnaire based on the findings of McGivney's 2002 study, plus the SRM. Participants and their perceptions are given detailed context through brief individual vignettes (Appendix 7) however in this section findings from their perceptions of value are presented thematically.

The questionnaire asked participants to consider 31 aspects in terms of value they perceived in these areas resulting from their degree experience. McGivney indicated these as value however participants expanded their interpretation of these as areas of development which had value and this informed the way they were phrased for Phase 2. These were presented in a random order but interviewees grouped these within the triad elements:

<b>Personal</b> (13 elements)	self-confidence, self-esteem, tolerance, understanding of others, changed attitudes, personal independence, personal satisfaction, improved social confidence, wider social circle, community Involvement, self-worth, improved social skills, sense of personal achievement.
<b>Academic</b> (9 elements)	ability to work independently, knowledge of own capabilities, political awareness, knowledge, greater awareness of the world, ability to work towards collective goals, love of learning, ability to study, self-criticality.
<b>Economic/financial</b> (9 elements)	wider aspirations, direction for life, qualifications, improved financial ability, skills to get first job, career advancement abilities, team/group working skills, awareness of new opportunities, new networks.

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<sup>23</sup> Self- Reported Measurement of Value Weighting is explained in detail in 4.11

It is not considered possible to quantify value because what one person perceives as valuable will be different from that of another due to their personal circumstances, background, and/or expectations. However it is possible to identify whether patterns exist in the allocation of perceptions of value.

## 5.2 Summary of interview responses to the Research Question and objectives

During Phase 1 data collection all 15 participant graduates expressed perceptions of overall value in their degree although these varied in both location and intensity of value.

*“I honestly think that university was the best experience I’ve ever done, and that is from the personal side of it...I do not regret going to university at all.”*

(A12)

*“I suspect it’s probably far more about the social and personal experience over and above the academic experience, that’s what I value above all, I value that immensely. It was a very positive, very enjoyable three years of my life and I thoroughly enjoyed it.”* (A14)

## 5.3 What value do graduates perceive in their degree?

The value and benefits perceived in completing a degree were identified from literature and from graduates through the interviews, questionnaire and the SRM. Graduates identified two main forms of value – direct (for example gaining a qualification and/or a vibrant social life) and developmental or indirect (the opportunity to learn and/or to develop skills they enhanced in later life).

Whilst the hegemonic discourse guiding political policy places emphasis on the economic/financial benefits of a degree to the individual this was not evidenced in the graduate interviews.

Through their SRM and interview responses nine of the 15 graduates indicated that the most important value to them from the experience was personal. This was largely identified as personal development in self and social identity through

learning to live and work with others. Two mature students additionally considered personal development as self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence expressed in the work/academic environment. They saw this as development of personal attitudes, strengths and skills and did not attribute this value to the academic aspect of their degree.

These allocations of value from interview analysis were unchanged by institutional type, discipline studied or distance from graduation.

Three graduates indicated that they considered academic value most important whilst a further three attributed relatively even value across each element within their degree experience.

Phase 1 identified graduate responses to the research objectives as follows:

- Establish the factors influencing or potentially influencing graduate perceptions of value within their university degree experience.
- The key factors influencing perception of value identified from coding interview transcripts aligned with personal, academic and economic areas as shown in Table 4.
- Entry motivation and expectational pressure on individuals to undertake a degree was indicated as having a significant impact on final value perceived.

Table 4 Key factors influencing value perception

Personal factors influencing value perception	Academic factors influencing value perception	Economic/financial factors influencing value perception
Recognition of degree by peers, family, and/or self	Degree Classification	Recognition of degree by employer/s
Expectational pressures from family, teachers, discipline, institution and/or self	Classification related to expectation	Application of degree in employment
Student lifestyle	Flexibility of study	Work to earn during learning
Extra-curricular involvement	Continuation of study with postgraduate or professional qualifications	

**1. Establish common perceptions of value or lack of value identified by graduates of undergraduate university degrees.**

Perceptions of value were highest in the areas of personal independence, knowledge of own capabilities and qualifications; perceptions of low value were identified in political awareness, self-criticality, skills to get first job and community involvement (particularly low among part-time students and those living at home).

**2. Identify how value perceived within these graduate perceptions reflects or aligns with HE policy**

HE Policy can be seen to be emphasizing the economic/financial values of a degree to the individual who undertakes it (Browne, 2010; Students at the Heart of the System, 2011; BIS, 2015). However only one graduate interviewed considered this the most valuable aspect of their degree.

Ten graduates valued the economic/financial lowest on their SRM. In interviews the six graduates who were 15 years or further from their degree experience identified that their degree had enabled them to secure or develop careers as well as giving them skills to develop their careers from that starting point. All six were in positions of employing others and articulated that they sought graduates because of their skills in critical thinking, research and evaluation rather than specific knowledge content. This was in direct contrast to more recent graduates

(A1 for example) who considered that on interview panels they looked for work experience and content. It may be that this is a reflection of their own degree experience, the lack of value they placed on the academic in terms of developing skills, attitude and approach or their particular discipline, or a lack of maturity in employing others. However if employers of tomorrow are not identifying the value in employing graduates but preferring non-graduates (who may be cheaper to employ), there are considerable implications for the sustainability of encouraging graduate study as a route to future employment.

Additionally as Lewis (1989) indicates, when we have attained an outcome we are inclined to value it less, which may be relevant to relatively new graduates. The apparent difference in perception as distance from the degree experience increases may also indicate increasing maturity leads to deeper understanding of the potential impact of a graduate in the workplace. This could indicate that a degree has career enhancement and advancement value, thus offering economic stability/sustainability. It may also be that universities have changed curricular approaches in recent years as a result of the funding changes, with perhaps unforeseen consequence that newer graduates are less supportive of the system they experienced, and thus less likely to value the employment of fellow graduates.

## Themes arising from the coding

### 5.4 Personal factors influencing value perceptions

Four areas influencing perceptions arose within the personal classification:

- a) expectations / motivations
- b) recognition of degree achievement
- c) student lifestyle
- d) extra-curricular involvement

#### **(a) Expectations**

Ten of the 15 graduates said they had experienced expectational pressures to go to university. They identified these as exerted by parents, teachers, the discipline they were studying, and potential employers. Their own intrinsic expectations, often resulting from these external pressures, were evident in 12 interviews.



These extrinsic and intrinsic expectations created the individual benchmarks against which they gauged their degree value. Additionally when strong external pressure was identified, it appeared to have the impact of reducing individual perception of personal value perhaps through diminishing a sense of independence, control, and involvement. Parental expectations were expressed as powerful forces (aligning with Brooks & Everett, 2009), exerted equally by parents with personal experience of higher education, and those who had not.

*“It was expected of me. My parents saw it as a rite of passage and an opportunity. The Second World War was where my father left home and he had his experience in the war; my eldest brother got married at 21 and left home which was the other option. You either got married and left home, or you went to university and left home, or went to war.” (A15)*

*“The family were I think very proud that one of us was going to do well enough at a level to be accepted into a university. It was seen as an achievement. Because they had no experience of higher education, I’m not sure how much further it extended beyond thinking it was a good thing in and of itself. It would develop you as an intellectual being and probably as a social being as well because it’s three years living away from home, growing up a bit as a young adult.” (A14)*

Family pressure led two graduates directly to their choice of institution, subject and future career which had direct influence on their own expectations:

*“I was the first one to go to uni. I felt under big pressure - my parents wanted me to go to uni, and I was the last one to get free tuition fees so my parents really pushed me to go in, not to take a gap year. They thought it was better if I did university, that there would be better career prospects, so I thought the same way, I thought you would be more likely to get a job, to be successful in a career. I think arts and other things my parents didn’t see as viable for career and my parents had a big impact at that time. My parents did want me to go to London more than any other city, they read somewhere that 80% of students stayed and got jobs where they studied, and London is one of the best places for jobs.” (A10)*

*“The value of a higher education was part of our upbringing absolutely, and we were told - the generation before mum were all nurses, and mum’s generation were all teachers - we were going on up the next rung. I was going to be a doctor and my younger sister became a lawyer.” (A8)*

Four interviewees who perceived they had been subjected to significant external expectational pressure combined with a high workload involving many examinations, recalled severe anxiety issues (A8, A10, A13 and A15), and relief that their degree experience was over. Two of these (A8 and A10) were Russell Group graduates.

*“Thirty five years on I still have nightmares about it, about a sense of lack of control. I was completely out of control at university in my final year at university.” (A15)*

*“I do just feel relief, relief at getting through...” (A8)*

*“I still get nightmares that I’m not prepared for the exams, I’m not ready for the exams, I’m going to fail the exams. All through my GCSEs and A levels it was never that way but all through university I was under a lot of stress and I think I still sometimes even now, a couple of months ago I had another nightmare. It’s a recurring theme, and then I’m so relieved, I think back and wake up and am relieved I’m not doing the exam, it’s done, that part of my life is over.” (A10)*

Two graduates saw expectational pressures from members of their extended family and society as significant.

*“All my cousins have gone so far, Mum dropped out of university, Dad didn’t do university, Grandpa was a lecturer and all mum’s side are teachers, my grandpa’s a teacher and that initially was it. I just followed the family. I felt pressured in the way that because of all the cousins got 2.1s and so if I was to get a 2.2 that wouldn’t have been good.” (A13)*

*“My mum had gone, my dad had gone, not my grandparents. I don’t think my mum would have been that disappointed if I hadn’t because I was quite motivated and wanted to do something and didn’t want to sit around just*

*being lazy so it was that or get a job... I think you know, although I'm proud of my achievement, and I got a first and I'm proud of that, it's a bit of a tick in the box, there's a societal expectation on white middle class boys and girls getting it."* (A1)

The seven interviewees who entered higher education straight from school identified teachers as having an important role in forming their initial expectations of university. This was most emphasised by those graduates who were the first generation in their families to enter HE: perhaps because they too saw value in drawing, as this research does, on the experience and knowledge of those with first-hand or close experience.

*"I was the first person in my family to go to uni and my head of sixth form said 'What do you enjoy?' We had meetings with the head of 6th form and I remember going in and he said 'What do you want to do?' I said I wanted to be a teacher, he said look at your A-levels, look at xxx University because my daughter went there and she absolutely loved it. That was the only reason I went there."* (A12)

However one candidate this encouragement as influenced by neo-liberal demands on schools to achieve results through their students to be reflected within league tables.

*"I felt under pressure initially at the start of the whole application process because the school had me down as one of the year's candidates that should apply to Oxford or Cambridge. I didn't want to go, a friend's brother had gone to Cambridge, enjoyed it academically but not at all socially and felt rather out of place and I actually went and visited him for a weekend and came to the conclusion that I didn't feel like I would fit in at Cambridge either so I rejected that idea which the school weren't happy about, because obviously that's one less person that they got into Cambridge."* (A14)

One mature student, who began her degree at the age of 39, saw value in how her degree changed not only her attitude but also that of her father:

*“Mum and Dad both feel that a woman’s place is to stay at home... but when I passed my Dad cottoned onto the fact that maybe he had got it wrong years ago.” (A8)*

### **(b) Recognition**

Recognition was a theme of value apparent in every interview. How graduates recognised value personally and perceived important others (namely peers and family), recognised their degree influenced their own perception of its value.

*“My friends from home say every year you are really changing, you are a different person now. Even the way I speak is different from five years ago but if it is for the better, and I feel it is, then I don’t mind changing.” (A3)*

This concept of personal validation through recognised personal transformation, change and development was apparent in 11 of the 15 interviews.

*“I felt I needed to move forward if I wanted to change what I was doing or to better myself I needed to go back into education, and I did through my degree.” (A9)*

*“It did obviously change my life... It was for me more of a personal development more than an academic ...” (A5)*

*“I think when I was 19 I was young, not very mature, arrogant maybe would be the word... The whole experience definitely made me more independent, more confident and I grew up as a person. Quite possibly I could have grown up as a person staying at home but that is very hypothetical.” (A6)*

*“I don’t think I would have grown up as effectively if I hadn’t gone to university. I would have been a quite different person if I hadn’t gone to university, I can’t imagine what would have ended up as without doing it. For me it was important even though I failed a year. I ended up with a personal identity which I hadn’t got when I started. I wouldn’t say my degree gave me confidence, I went in at 18 with childish confidence, and when I came out I wasn’t quite so confident but I had the social skills to understand why I wasn’t quite so confident.” (A15)*

One student from a Russell Group university was identified from his responses as a research outlier. He expressed a personally regressive, negative impact.

*"I went in feeling quite confident, I did well to get into xxx, you know it was an achievement. But after a while I realised maybe I was out of my depth, I was struggling and there wasn't much help, so confidence did take a knock and by the end I was not confident at all in myself."* (A10)

### **c) Student lifestyle**

The lifestyle experienced whilst students whether they had lived at home, in university halls or rented accommodation, emerged for many as a powerful value factor. This was particularly evident for 9 of the 15 who moved out of or away from home whilst studying, 7 of whom went straight to university from school.

*"I honestly think the university was the best experience I've ever done and that is from the personal side of it. University for me was all about living away from home, doing what I wanted, managing my finances and the people..."* (A12)

*"It's awful, it should be the work, but the value's in being away from home. The first year I really made the most of living away from family not having any curfews and I went out 3 times a week probably and worked, because it's the freedom but then second year was work, third year I even dropped my jobs because I knew I would have to knuckle down."* (A13)

*"It was absolutely worth it. It was absolutely brilliant, and I think it was not necessarily the degree experience although that contributed, but it was the university experience, moving out."* (A1)

*"Originally I lived in with my parents but then I realised I wanted to have the student lifestyle so ... I decided to move into student accommodation. The first year of university in that accommodation was a very good year of my life, because I class that as being a proper student, and I don't class being a proper student as something to do with studying. I was getting involved, and I think when you get a load of young people living in student blocks there is this type of lifestyle you achieve, everyone going out together and just enjoying themselves."* (A5)

The three mature students interviewed had no expectations of getting involved in a student lifestyle and did not. However they expressed strong perceptions of personal value in terms of development and satisfaction particularly that arising from academic achievement.

*"I did no social stuff in the uni at all. We were eight nurses brought together for a course, all of us being mums, all of us being over 30 so all of us being between the ages of 30 and 42, and we were still employed by the health authority so we were seconded. When you're at university you are just there because you are doing your course, that's your mind-set." (A7)*

*"We didn't socialise together. We were all working. We remained friends on the course but since the day we graduated, hats off and I haven't seen one of them since." (A9)*

#### **(d) Extra-curricular involvement**

Nine of the 15 interviewees expressed perceptions of value in terms of the skills and development they had obtained through extra-curricular activities, six involving students' union activities. This led them to identify community involvement, leadership and team working development.

*"I ended up being the entertainments manager at the SU, I was a DJ too part time and that's how I earned my money to get through my course. We used to organise events and it worked really well because it was all in the evenings, and it didn't affect my course." (A5)*

*"I worked as the Aimhigher ambassador and from that I got an external job with a school helping with their gifted and talented stuff and I used to do open days and things. I ended up running one of the volunteering projects with the local police... In my final year because I got involved in extra-curricular opportunities, in my final year I was persuaded to run for a sabbatical officer which I won." (A12)*

*"I was very active as a member of the university theatre group, played in student bands, I suddenly had a really active social life which I hadn't had before and I think that gave me a great deal of social and personal confidence. I actually edited the SU student newspaper for a year." (A14)*

*“I did the students’ union discos, getting involved in bands, being stage crew. I did that for free and thoroughly enjoyed it. People were going to the shows and concerts and enjoying them and we were doing the background work to make them happen, it was great fun. I learned how to work in a group through what I did with the students’ union better than dealing with anybody with academic group work. The academic group work was kind of made up stuff, the volunteering for the Students’ Union was real.” (A15)*

## 5.5 Academic factors influencing value perceptions

Three factors emerged as being of significance in the perception of value in academic terms

- a) Perceptions of academic value
- b) Final classification and its relationship to expectation
- c) Flexible study

### **(a) Perception of academic value**

Graduates were divided regarding perception of academic value in their degrees. The differences of what they perceived as important in academic value terms were interesting. Whilst all indicated it amounted to the development of knowledge and skills, they were then divided. Three emphasised content/knowledge transmission alone, six recognised value in the development and involvement in their learning, while another six saw value in developing skills in critical thinking and communication.

Positive value in the process of learning was identified by four graduates:

*“There’s the value - I enjoyed it, I enjoyed learning, I enjoyed the process of putting together a paper a dissertation...” (A4)*

*“It was a purely academic experience. I found it was enlightening but also I felt more confident in what I was doing in some ways it supported and backed up what I may have been doing anyway but with a foundation of knowledge to support it.” (A9)*

*"I came out of the experience a better and more intelligent thinker than when I arrived." (A14)*

*"I really enjoyed taking time out from what I'm used to doing and I thoroughly enjoyed reading the background and spending time looking at the theory." (A8)*

Academic value was the one area where ten graduates expressed doubt over a what they saw as a lack of perceived value. This was articulated as a perceived lack of challenge or a failure to meet expectations of what a degree should be:

*"It wasn't really an academic degree; it was quite a vocational degree. I did enjoy the work, it was fun." (A1)*

*"I don't feel I gained much from the academic study apart from the piece of paper. I probably learned to argue more than anything. The worst thing I ever did discover at university was that I could get a good grade by writing my assignment the night before...once I did that game over." (A12)*

*"In academic terms I'm not sure if it had a lot of academic value. I learned how to write assignments and things like that, but it's not something I'm going to use in the future, as I'm not planning on doing a PhD or anything." (A6)*

*"In academic terms I can't remember any of the theory we were taught at the beginning of each module, I don't use any of it. Certain strategies and other things within education possibly..." (A13)*

*"Academically I think I didn't learn very much. I've forgotten most of it because I'm not using it, it was pretty much regurgitation. We had one lecturer and all we had to do was literally read his book. And his lectures were exactly the same, we had each chapter in the book, and all the work he set us was all in his book. I even gave up going to lectures and just read the book because I would learn so much faster than falling asleep in the lecture". (A10)*



### **(b) Degree Classification**

Two graduates who were awarded first class honours degrees expressed surprise. They considered their classifications unexpected and in some ways undeserved which appeared to reduce their academic value perception.

*"I got a first class degree classification. My results were not great and I'm not sure how I did it." (A1)*

*"I got a first somehow - I wasn't on line for a first on the way through." (A6)*

Two others saw the classification they obtained as fair reward for the effort and work they invested in their degree:

*"I've got a 2:2 probably because the first year I lived at home in London but it was too far to commute every day you spend too much time commuting, so the second and third year I moved out so it was easier to stay and use the library, use the resources..." (A3)*

*"I was extremely tired throughout it working long hours through the night, that's just how I do it until 12, 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock but knowing that I got that 2.1 extremely happy, proud." (A13)*

Three graduates considered their classification lower than expected. For all this was a matter of regret for which they felt their institution bore responsibility through poor advice or practice by their university or individual academics. All three were male, and focused on the product of the experience rather than the process, particularly how others would view their final classification.

*"If I hadn't taken the genetics course I would have got a 2.1 so there is a nasty taste in my mouth of regret and disappointment because I was really close." (A10)*

*"It was really positive apart from the dissertation which was really frustrating and that really hit my ego because I thought what I did was really good and obviously one tutor agreed but one disagreed." (A5)*

*"I got a 2:1 and it wasn't until after I submitted my last piece of work the tutor said it was such a shame I had missed a First by just a few marks."*

*That was so frustrating because if only I had known I could have put in enough to get me there.” (A9)*

However one student laid the responsibility for his lower than expected classification firmly at his own door:

*“I failed and retook my final year whilst getting married, having babies, and buying a house and all sorts of crazy things. I didn’t quite get enough modules but I passed with very high grades. I worked far too hard but I didn’t have enough modules to get an honours degree. So I have an ordinary degree.” (A15)*

### **c) Flexibility of study**

Flexibility of study was identified as a factor of value in their academic experience for two graduates who worked full-time whilst studying. One studied part-time, the other full-time.

*“The first year was obviously a foundation degree because I had no A levels. I did that for 5 years, 2 evenings a week, part-time because I was working full-time too.” (A9)*

*“I was doing a full-time degree, and working. The arrangement I had was I had 2 half day lectures so I was leaving the office to go to lectures and then making up the time during the week because we had flexi-time so basically I just need to make up the hours. So I had to start early and stay late some days to make up for the time when I wasn’t in the office.” (A11)*

A11 identified academic value in working within an area relevant to his degree whilst studying even though this was not a formal part of his course:

*“My degree had no work experience. Some of the courses were like sandwich courses, the one that I did didn’t but there were other programmes that had that facility. I think I did actually benefited more out of the degree course because I could identify with the bits that were relevant in the work place because I was sitting on the fence between the work and the academic side. I benefited unlike the undergraduates who had no work experience. I was doing a full time degree, and working.” (A11)*

## 5.6 Economic/financial factors influencing value perceptions

The economic/financial factors interviewees identified as influencing how they subsequently perceived the value of their degree were:

- a) Application of degree
- b) Employer recognition of degree
- c) Career focus
- d) Working to earn
- e) Career choice
- f) Pragmatic expectations

### **(a) Application of degree**

Application of the learning from their degree was significant for seven interviewees across the spectrum of distance from graduation, not all of whom had been motivated by a specific career path. They expressed value in the applicability of their degree in terms of employment opportunities; in resulting financial security created by employment stability; and in how their degree had developed their professional confidence and identity.

*“It was a means to an end, because I wanted to qualify as a doctor. It opened the door for me, it opened the door for my future...It’s given me a secure future; it’s given me a financial security.” (A8)*

*“My degree gave me validation that I had the theory to meet my practice. My practice was very good - I’m very good at what I do, but what I now have is the underpinning knowledge that gives me the confidence to hold my own, because I now have the research base to actually define my argument that I want to make and that for me, that’s what university gave me.” (A7)*

*“I chose computer science because I wanted a degree that I could get a job at the end of it. It is true that I learned how to do computing, so I’ve had a career that’s lasted 35 years and I’ve hardly been out of work.. earning good money all that time. Without my degree it would have been much harder.” (A15)*

### **(b) Employer recognition of degree**

Specific recognition by employers of a degree as a requirement for employment and their understanding of its import was seen as a significant factor in developing value by all graduates, whether or not they had taken a degree with a specific career goal in mind. Seven graduates saw their degree as respected by employers and a direct enabler of their subsequent career success, as the following comments illustrate:

*"I think the value was the piece of paper that I got at the end that said I had a degree. I think without it I wouldn't be where I am today so the University really gave me a great stepping stone. My dream when I was little was I always wanted to be a teacher so the only way I could do that was to get a degree. I knew what I wanted to do when I went in, and when I left that hadn't really changed."* (A2)

*"Most recruiters would prefer you to have a degree than not, so it has been good in advancement terms. It gives you a much broader understanding of your chosen area, so it's given me the edge."* (A11)

*"The way I see my degree is a piece of paper that opens doors for me in terms of jobs."* (A12)

Eight graduates were less sure of how their degree was perceived by others, or indeed its value to employers, and subsequently questioned its value as a result. Their comments stemmed from the lack of overt recognition they perceived, and in not seeing this they then questioned whether their degree had value. There were indications that if these doubting graduates were employers they replicating this uncertainty among graduates they encounter:

*"It can't be removed and it's great, but I just wonder how much difference it would make if I had been working all that time. Initially in certain things like getting my foot in the door here, it gave me the start of a CV, of something tangible, that I could tout round, so that was useful. I sit on job interviews now... I can't remember the last time someone said 'in my degree I did x and y and z. I don't think having a degree has helped with job advancement*

*at all actually...Nobody has made a point of the fact I've got a degree. I don't think it's made any difference."* (A1)

*"The degree was of no value whatsoever. It may have got me into my first job, but no one ever saw it, no one has ever asked me for a certificate ever."* (A15)

*"I think 10 years ago it probably got me into interviews but really to where I am now? To be honest now it's been the experience in my job. I think with me the degree was a good life skill."* (A5)

*"You don't need a degree to get along in life, and you don't need a degree to be successful in life. From what I've seen it comes down to attitude and personality. University can open doors, I'm not saying it won't, it can open doors for you from the networks that you make, or maybe just the piece of paper depending on the institutions you are applying to for work, they may say oh you're a graduate, we'll take you on, but to be successful? I don't think you need a degree nowadays I think if you've got talent and willingness to work."* (A10)

*"In how I've gone on after university I haven't needed my degree as such. Getting my first job I didn't need that degree. I have in the job I have now but I don't feel that I've needed it. People have come with experience and no degree and come on top of me. I wonder whether my degree is important to me now."* (A13)

For one graduate, the intrinsic personal value of the degree supported their professional working practice, and self-recognition of value was evident as being extremely important. This individual entered HE as a mature student:

*"I felt more confident in what I was doing in some ways, it supported and backed up what I may have been doing anyway but with a foundation of knowledge to support it and I think that confidence then came out in my business practices as well. It certainly changed me from a business and a working point of view."* (A9)

### **c) Career focus**

Being expected to go to university but without having a compass of clear personal career goals emerged as a negative factor in their perception of value for four graduates. Their experiences showed that extrinsic pressures without intrinsic goals resulted in a lack of personal benchmarking and goal setting. Some with clear goals identified them as being developed pre-course, supporting the original selection of their course and/or institution, but for others such goals had been developed during their course. A lack of clearly defined career direction was perceived to reduce value perception as these comments indicate:

*“... it is very hard to look back and not think about the what ifs...I just drifted through it...I don't know that having a degree adds anything to my life now.”*

(A4)

*“I think I'm still disappointed about what I did, or maybe didn't do. There will always be regret but I have achieved being able to get through it. It was not what I want to get out of it so in some ways I failed, but in surviving through it all I have achieved.”* (A10)

#### **(d) Working to learn**

Working to earn whilst learning was an area of enjoyment for three younger students not reliant on their earnings.

*“I did work a lot outside of the university - I mean work for money - because I love travelling so I was trying to save money for travelling.”* (A6)

However one student, dependent on the money he earned saw ‘working to learn’ as a struggle that set him apart from his undergraduate peers socially and academically, and fuelled his resentment. This aligns with Callender’s (2008) findings identifying a growth in term-time student employment and the relative numbers of disadvantaged students involved. That study concluded that rising fees would lead to students perceiving these as debt rather than investment, and this was apparent among those in this study who worked to survive whilst learning. Thus potentially it could also be seen as a factor adversely influencing perceptions of value through reducing opportunities to fully participate in a degree experience

*“In a way I felt I was at a disadvantage because I couldn't put in as much time as I wanted to, and also I had, I just had to concentrate on surviving whilst handling the massive workload they give you. I'm not from a rich*

*background so I had to work to struggle to find the money to pay my rent and everything, so I was working a lot to pay for that. Most of them came from quite wealthy backgrounds, they were private schoolers, some from Eton, and they didn't need to work. Some people did, there were very few in my boat who were working as well, the majority were well funded so it was all right for some.” (A10)*

However the two students who worked full-time to survive whilst studying also saw the work to learn requirement as a necessity, not a disadvantage as identified earlier (flexibility of study).

### **(e) Choice**

One part-time mature student said the value in his degree lay in realisation of personal choice. It enabled him to leave a lucrative job for one where he earned less but gained greater personal satisfaction. This connects to the view explored in Chapter Two of degree knowledge having symbolic value (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006; Pritchard & Roberts 2006)

*“There’s no doubt it gave me something as an individual that I didn’t have before. To be able to move forward, to get another job, to have a new future, it certainly gave me that. I wouldn’t have walked out of that company if I hadn’t had a degree – it made me a stronger individual knowing I could take that piece of paper and move forward. There is no doubt I felt more confident and certainly I would not be here today even though I may not be earning anywhere near the same sort of money. Without the degree I would not have been able to get where I am now. It has opened a huge amount of doorways. I am a much happier person as a result.”(A9)*

### **(f) Pragmatic expectations**

A graduate who considered the academic and personal value of his degree to have been substantial felt these had met his high expectations, which had included no specific financial goals.

*“Because I was aware I was graduating into fairly deep recession I didn’t expect an English degree to make me rich. I didn’t go in with any personal financial expectations so I didn’t get disappointed.” (A14)*

## 5.7 SRM allocation of value

Coding gave a broad-brush indication of value which was augmented through employing the SRM that asked graduates to allocate value across their degree experience into the areas of economic/financial; personal and academic.

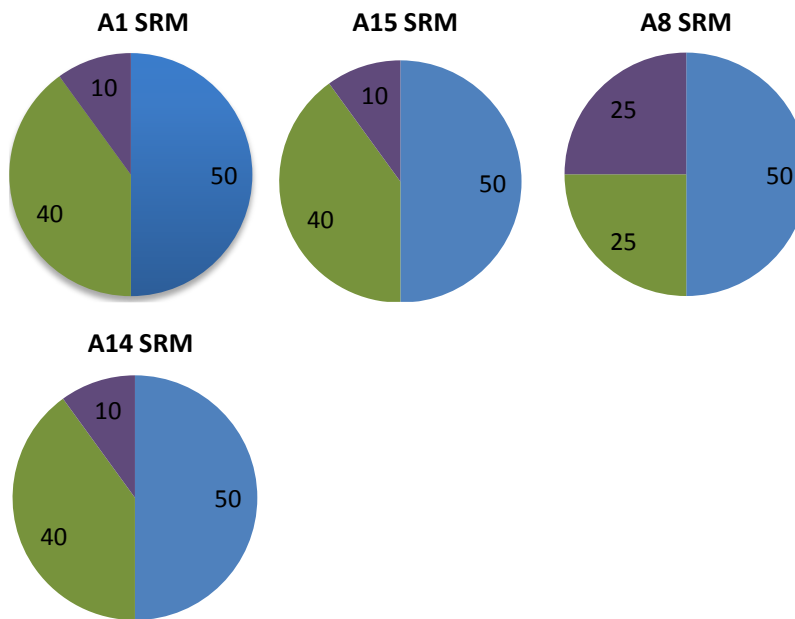
From the SRM, four thematic groupings of responses emerged:

1. 50% of value allocated to personal (4 participants) Figure 15
2. >50% of value allocated to personal (5 participants) Figure 19.
3. 50% or more value allocated to academic (3) participants Figure 20.
4. Relatively even division of perception of value across all three areas (3 participants) Figure.21.

Each thematic grouping was explored for similarities and differences around the key questions of academic, personal and economic/financial value development as shown in Figures 16, 17, and 18.



**1. Group with Personal Value allocation of 50% (4 participants)**



Key: Academic (Knowledge/Skills) Economic/financial Personal

Fig. 15. SRM perception of value group with 50% personal allocation of value

This group all considered themselves to have been motivated to take a degree by parents, wider family, teachers and in one case peers. None worked to earn whilst learning and none lived at home. The social life of university was a dominant feature of their interviews, and the fact that none were working whilst studying enabled them to enjoy *“the party life”* as one described it, to the full. They followed the paths laid down by expectations of parents, academics and peers during their degrees.

As can be seen academic value was the next predominant value perceived by three of the four in this group. The fourth equated academic value with economic/financial.

Their interview questionnaires enabled a more detailed picture of what these graduates considered they had personally developed as a result of their degree. The detail of SRM results for all participants appears in Appendix 8 however for this first group these are illustrated here.

Within personal value there were no areas of common agreement. However the group all identified value accrued at differing levels through development of

personal achievement, self-worth, wider social circle, improved social confidence, understanding of others and self-confidence. (Figure 16).

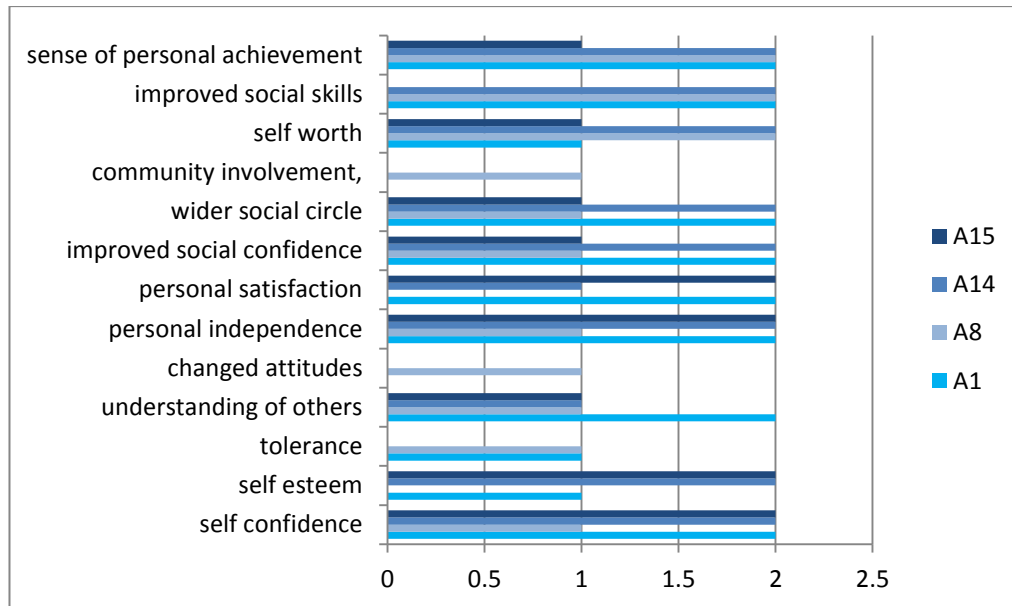


Fig 16 Personal Value development during degree - group with 50% personal allocation on SRM

The picture was significantly different in terms of academic value where only three areas were recognised as being of value by all: ability to study, greater awareness of the world and knowledge. Criticality and a love of learning were seen by two interviewees as areas where they had gained no value during their degree. They felt they had entered their degree with these and seen no change. Two graduates in this group indicated similar perception about gaining political awareness during their studies (Figure 17).

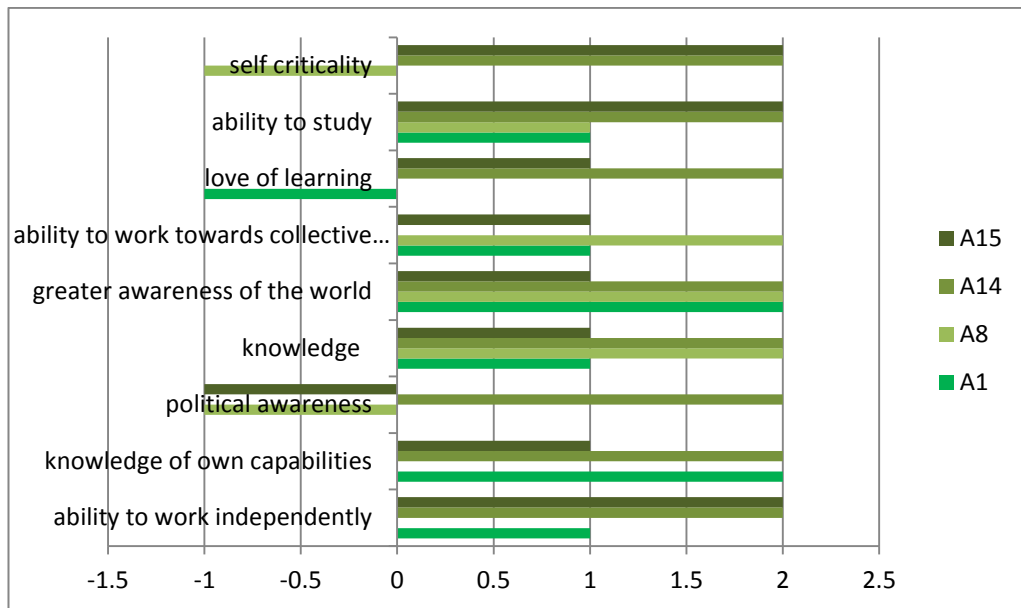


Fig. 17 Academic Value development during degree - group with 50% personal allocation on SRM

Greater convergence emerged in economic/financial value with all allocating the highest value to the qualification obtained. Whilst attributing different weightings, all considered they had developed new networks, awareness of new opportunities, improved financial ability and developed wider aspirations. One saw no career advancement, and another saw no evidence through employer recognition or application that his degree had helped secure his first job (Fig 18).

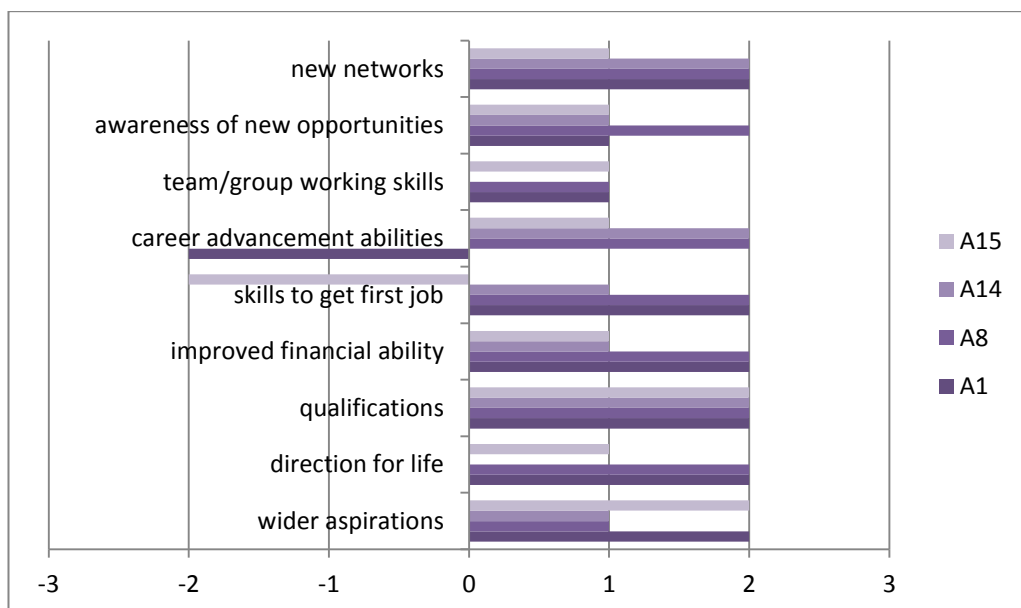


Fig. 18 Economic/financial Value development during degree – group with 50% personal allocation on SRM.

## 2. Group with Personal Value allocation of >50% (5 participants)

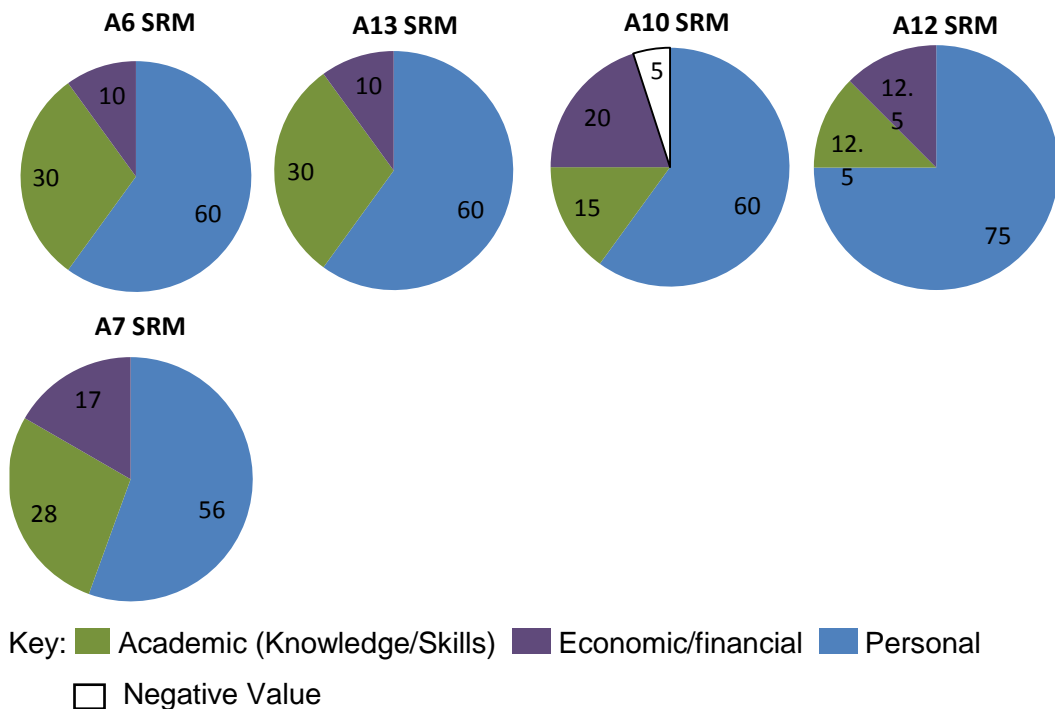


Fig. 19 SRM perception of value group with more than 50% personal allocation of value

This group all worked to earn whilst studying, some from necessity, others from choice. All reported experiencing significant external pressures before and during their degrees. These pressures were sometimes financial but also from parental or employer expectations and demands for success. All interviewees were critical of the value of their degrees but determined to find some value in their investment of effort in the experience even if that was not the value emphasised by their sources of pressure. This was demonstrated by comments about expectation evident such as:

*"I know it should be the academic, but it's the personal."* (A13)

They, like the previous group who recorded 50% personal value all indicated little perception of autonomy in their degree outside the personal. Within the questionnaire (Appendix 8 Figs. a, b, and c) detailed pictures emerged indicating that this group all identified development of wider aspirations and new networks as valuable. Only one (A12) identified development of political awareness, perhaps resulting from high community involvement that was a feature of her degree experience.

With the exception of A10 who was identified as potential outlier and reported negative losses in some areas such as self-confidence; self-worth and knowledge development, it was significant that all of this group identified areas that they felt they had come to university with, but not developed. Whilst these were different (personal, academic and/or economic/financial) they indicated an experienced lack of development value for all in this group.

### 3. Group with Academic Value allocation of 50% or more (3 participants)

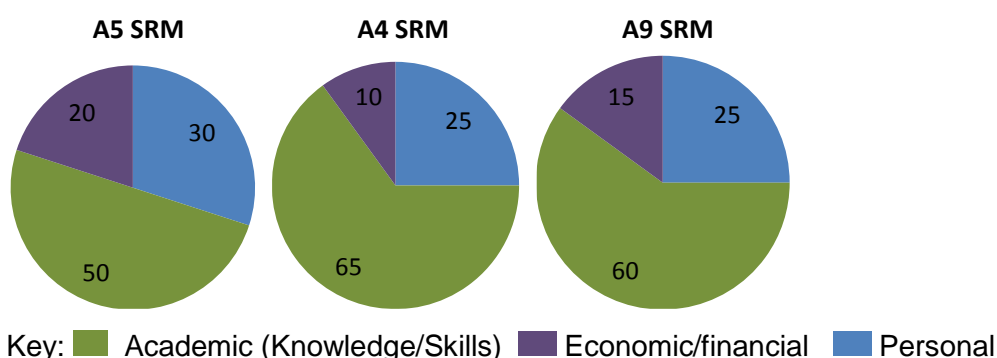


Fig. 20. SRM perception of value group with 50% or more of academic value

None of this group required a degree for a specific career goal, being drawn to their area of study by interest and enthusiasm for their discipline. All were motivated by personal aspiration and indicated that their degree experience revolved around their subject with limited involvement in extra-curricular activities.

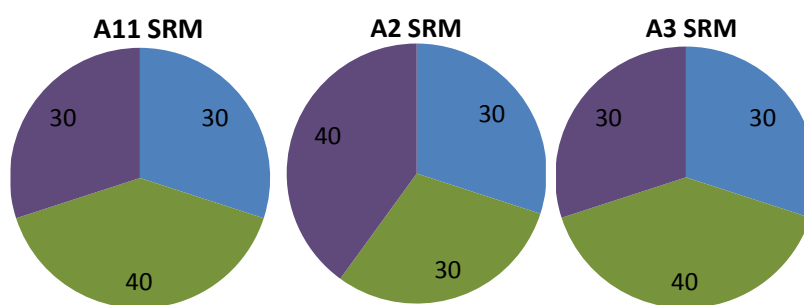
All, as might be expected, demonstrated within their questionnaire responses that value in knowledge development across their degree experience, and that they had developed knowledge of their own capabilities. Two graduates indicated their degree had not enhanced their love of learning, or the ability to work independently and one respondent felt their self-criticality had remained undeveloped from entry.

This group were united in their agreement in terms of the areas of development they perceived, if not the quantified value they considered they had accrued (Appendix 8 Figs.d, e and f). A sense of personal achievement, self-worth, personal independence, changed attitudes, understanding of others and self-confidence all featured within their positive personal development areas. One

mature graduate considered she had not sought or experienced any personal development in terms of improved social skills, community involvement, development of a wider social circle or improved social confidence considering these already existed.

However it was within the economic/financial value development areas that this group were most divided. They concurred that they had experienced value in career advancement, qualifications and a direction for life. What was significant was that none of the graduates perceived they had developed new networks; only one recognised development of wider aspirations; only one perceived development of an improved financial ability and only one perceived development of team working skills. None felt involved with their alma mater post-graduation.

#### 4. Group with relatively even division of perception of value across all three areas



Key: ■ Academic (Knowledge/Skills) ■ Economic/financial.. ■ Personal

Fig. 21. SRM perception of value group with allocation of value evenly allocated

This group were all motivated by personal aspiration and clearly defined career goals which they had achieved or begun to achieve at the time of interview. All saw their degree as an enabler, articulated as a step on a route to ultimate goals:

*"I think that in the present day if you don't have a degree then you are not marketable at all. If you don't have a degree then the chances are that you going to get a low paid job and you will probably find yourself struggling for an awfully long time unless something special happens to you."* (A2)

All articulated a belief that they had a personal role to play in the ultimate achievement of their goals. They expressed these as down to their own

engagement and efforts both during and after their degree. They felt their decision-making and actions had been part of active authorship of their success as these interviewee expressed:

*“It wasn’t always easy but I asked my lecturers what I needed to do to really understand where I went wrong so I could learn and I did. I chose some of the hardest modules because I wanted to learn as much as I could.” (A3)*

*“I remember it really being just a lot of reading and not a lot of fun, it wasn’t what I expected it to be, so my motivation for getting through was just to finish. I thought the classes would be more interesting and more challenging, I remember being really bored a lot and I think when the human mind is bored its learning shuts down.” (A2)*

All were male graduates of post '92 institutions and all at the time of interview were working in the areas to which their degrees directly related.

Within the questionnaire (Appendix 8 Figs g, h, and i) as might be expected this group showed broadly similar development of value recognition. They indicated positive development value across all three elements with the only negativity arising where they felt not that there had been a lack of development, but that they had not experienced value added as the result of their degree.

Interestingly all spontaneously expressed in interview that the opportunity to reflect and to consider their degree value as a whole had enabled them to recognise that the significant gains they had made or were making in their lives stemmed from the achievement of their first degrees.

## **5.8 Development of tools**

From the Phase 1 results it was hoped that utilising three methods of value perception within the interviews – the interview, the questionnaire and the SRM - would support identification of specific factors to explore within Phase 2. This was however a simplistic hope because although Phase 1 identified areas of significance for exploration with a larger population it also identified areas which might prove of interest if identified within a larger population. This underlines

issues with the interpretivist approach where divergence from the norm can be seen as a potential source of additional insight.

From the perception of an academic developer, and the recognition that the academic element is the unique element within a degree that makes it special compared to a three-year apprenticeship or three years gaining experience 'on the job' I considered it important to explore the academic value perception more deeply. Graduates from all institutions during the interviews tended to articulate the academic knowledge and skills element of their degree experience in narrow terms, defining it generally as content delivery and absorption, potentially demonstrating limited recognition of latent value.

The Phase 1 questionnaire was intended as an initial pilot of the Phase 2 survey as outlined in Chapter 4. As interviewees worked through the 26 questions it was possible to see where they paused, questioned, and allocated, gaining an understanding of what they saw as academic, personal or economic/financial. Their classification of these areas fed into the development of the subsequent general and academic value questions for the Phase 2 survey (Appendix 2).

The decision to separate the Phase 2 questionnaire into value added questions (VAS) and academic value questions (AVI) was to enable Phase 2 participants to have greater opportunity to identify specific value areas of their academic experience. As an academic developer I was interested to see results from graduates having the opportunity to think of and focus on their academic experience. For example, in Phase 1 graduates suggested they saw team working as a valuable skill gained during their degree, but none considered this to have been developed through the academic element of their course, most attributing it to extra-curricular opportunities often offered by the Students' Union (Ingham, 2014). Distinguishing the value source led to the AVI as a means to enable respondents to identify value areas arising from the academic element of their degree or from the broader experience (Table 5). Accordingly overlapping elements were inserted into the VAS and the AVI to determine in which areas graduates identified value.



Table 5 Connections between the Value Added Scores and Academic Value Indicator in Phase 2

VAS- How did your degree experience add value	AVI - How did your academic learning add value to you
<b>Written communication</b>	<b>Improved communication abilities</b>
<b>Spoken communication</b>	
<b>Presentation skills</b>	
<b>Ability to work on my own</b>	<b>Ability to work on your own</b>
<b>Team/group working skills</b>	<b>Ability to work in a team</b>
<b>Knowledge of my own capabilities</b>	<b>Ability to learn from your mistakes</b>
<b>Ability to shoulder responsibility</b>	<b>Leadership skills</b>
Self-discipline Self-confidence Improving social skills Tolerance of others Sense of self worth Improved understanding of others Self esteem Political awareness Awareness of new opportunities	Approaches to problem solving, research, evaluation Practical skills related to your subject Ability to learn from different situations, different tasks Subject knowledge

## 5.9 Findings related to institutional advancement – Phase 1

An unexpected area arose from the interviews, which led the research into considering areas of institutional advancement. Graduates at different distances from graduation and different institutions indicated how the importance of their own experience and the value they placed upon it had influenced them as ambassadors for higher education. In this their perceptions of value were seen to be directly influencing the continuation and sustainability of higher education and individual HEIs as indicated by researchers into this specific area (Clark, 1998; Simpson, 2001; Gallo, 2012, 2013).

The importance of personal recommendation was recognised as a key factor in decision making (p.100). Testimony from those with the credibility of first-hand

experience is recognised as an indicator of value and as valuable to others (Coady, 1992; Kusch & Lipton, 2002). The value graduates perceived was mirrored in their recommendation to or discouragement of prospective students, in some cases significant others such as their own children. This was recognised as another indication of their own perception of value (Ledden et al, 2011).

*"I certainly encouraged my children into thinking about higher education."*  
(A15)

*"I would say yes, take a degree, because it will stretch you mentally, will develop you as an adult capable of thinking things through for yourself and for the reasons that I most enjoyed the degree experience myself, it's an opportunity to spend three years of your life, less so than in my day, outside the pressure of career and finance, developing as a human being before you enter whatever the world of careers has in store for you at the end of that."* (A14)

*"I'm very excited that [my son]'s going - that he's having an opportunity to develop himself, because that's what a degree gives you, it gives you that personal development."* (A7)

*"I would absolutely 100% recommend an undergraduate degree to someone today. I have two beautiful children and I would recommend that they go to university as soon as they are ready."* (A2)

*"I am advising my children to go to university because they are in a different era where having a degree is like having your A or O levels. I think the world is becoming very international so they could end up in say China in 5-10 years' time, but one thing I wouldn't do is to restrict it by any geographical location. It is recognising there is a value to a degree, I think it is something that employers are looking for and therefore people are realising they need to do it if they are to be taken seriously."* (A11)

Others saw value in the knowledge they gained from their experience that enabled them to recognise that a degree was not for everyone.

*“Absolutely it was of value to me but not everybody is academic... I would actually suggest that everybody should either do a degree or do an apprenticeship.” (A8)*

*“Working in education means there are some people I see should take an academic route, and those that should take an artistic route, and there are children that I see and I think they need help with a vocation they need to be tailored and pushed towards some vocational route, and whether that means they get a degree as a result of it, but I think we need to advise and help them to find the best path for them rather than trying to push them all into a degree which is not going to help them possibly later on.” (A9)*

*“I don’t think everyone should go to university, I think everyone should have the opportunity to access higher education I don’t think your social standing, background or finance should be the reason you can enter higher education but I don’t think it’s for everybody. I think as a country trying to get everyone into higher education we put too much emphasis on higher education rather than going through alternative routes of learning.” (A12)*

## **5.10 Graduates as employers**

During their interviews some graduates indicated how their own perceptions of value had coloured their actions in employing graduates for their companies. Two graduates in areas outside academia held differing pre-conceived views of graduates coming before them. The ‘old school tie’ perception can be seen to be far from the reality they express. However it was apparent that their own value perceptions and how as employers they allow these to colour their perceptions of the value of employing a graduate (often a more expensive option than a school leaver or apprentice), has implications for the employability of future graduates as indicated in 5.3.

*“When I interview people I think having a degree is a good grounding to learn some basic skills.” (A15)*

*“I’ve just done an interview for an entry level job and what I was looking for was competencies in specific areas, can they show me through evidence*

*they are self-starters, they are motivated, nothing about a degree. On the form you just get to put what qualifications you've got so none of that detail, I can't remember the last time someone said in my degree I did x y and z."*  
(A1)

### 5.11 Continuing education

Nine graduates had continued studying; five taking further academic study and four completing professional study. Those who engaged in further academic study said their first degree had taught them how to study and that they had enjoyed the process of studying. Their second degrees did not result from consideration that their first degree lacked value that needed augmenting. This continued personal investment in continuing education can be seen as an indicator of value recognition in tertiary education and recognition of the credentialisation of employability (Brooks & Everett, 2009).

### 5.12 Summary of Phase 1 findings

All 15 graduates articulated positive values in their overall degree experience with this value arising from different aspects or combinations of aspects and thus being attributed differently.

### 5.13 Factors of influence

At the start of the study a range of factors were considered to have potential influence over perceptions of value, namely gender, age at entry, entry motivation, being first in the family to attend university, distance from graduation, discipline studied, student lifestyle, length of degree, and institutional group.

Distance from graduation did not emerge as a significant influence in perception of value which was surprising as it might have been expected that distance could cast a halo effect, or that there would be a difference because of the significant changes identified within higher education over the 43-year period of the interviewees' experience and specific student experience changes during that

time in the sector detailed in Chapter 2. None of these emerged from Phase 1 as key factors influencing value, although 13 factors emerged from the interview coding (Table 4).

Entry Motivation to undertake a degree emerged as an important factor in value perception. Indeed entry motivation and whether intrinsic or extrinsic, was emphasized within all interviews. Negative perceptions of value emerged where expectations were exclusively external in source. The impact of high expectations of family, teachers, peers and subsequent influence on personal expectations was evident in ten of the 15 interviews. Parental expectations were articulated as emphasising the hegemonic discourse of the economic/financial expectation of a degree to achieve personal career satisfaction and success.

For two graduates, significant value lay in unexpected elements. A12 became involved in volunteering and found new opportunities that became more important than her original goal of getting a degree to enable her to become a teacher; A9 found value in the choices his degree gave him, enabling him to leave a high-earning non-graduate position to take a more fulfilling but less well-paid graduate post.

A10 reported negative value perceptions in some areas believing he had suffered from intense parental pressure and expectation combined with the wrong course and a resulting low classification. His case was identified an outlier in terms of his responses. Whether his outlier status is applicable only to Phase 1 or replicated by other graduates particularly from Russell Group universities as he was, will be explored in Phase 2.

Student lifestyle proved an important factor for those who lived at home and those living away from home. For the nine who began their degree aged under 25, living away from home was a significant value factor in developing independence, learning to live with others, and experiencing personal freedom not previously encountered.

## 5.14 Questions and themes arising from Phase 1

Phase 1 identified 10 research questions for further exploration within Phase 2:

1. Would a larger sample of graduates attribute value in a similar pattern to those in Phase 1?
2. What is the impact on perceptions of value of both extrinsic and intrinsic pressure influencing entry motivation?
3. How do graduates specifically define academic value? ( AVI)
4. How do value perceptions vary among employed and unemployed graduates?
5. How do value perceptions among Oxford and Cambridge graduates compare with graduates from other institutions?
6. Are discernible patterns evident in demographics or experiences of graduates who perceived no value in their degrees?
7. Is it possible to confirm whether the perceptions of A10 are those of an outlier or an indicator of a lack of value perception among Russell Group graduates who consider themselves subjected to significant pressures?
8. Would a larger sample of graduates recording higher than expected classifications also identify any patterns in value reduction?
9. What connections are identifiable between value recommendations post-degree and entry motivation?
10. What is the relationship between graduates' overall value scores (OVS) and their recommendations for a degree, for their institution and their course?

## Summary of Part A

- This section outlined the findings from coding of Phase 1's 15 semi structured interviews, their integral questionnaires, and development of graduate-led perception evaluation tools.
- The interviews identified an emphasis on personal value and a lowest allocation of value attributed to economic/financial development value.
- Phase 1 indicated an avenue for inquiry related to the impact of entry motivation influences (external/internal) and overall value perceptions.
- Phase 1 identified 10 questions to be considered within the larger population study of Phase 2.

## Chapter Five: Research findings into graduate perceptions of value

### Part B - Phase 2 - Survey

The perceptions of value of a larger graduate population are explored within this chapter in terms of their confirmation or refutation of the findings from Phase 1. Part B identifies the ways in which Phase 2 responses relate to the overarching research question and objectives and the areas arising from Phase 1. The comparison of findings between graduate responses in both phases enables further illumination of how graduates perceive value within their degree and the new knowledge this data reveals.

#### 5.15 Introduction to Phase 2 including influence of pilot

The survey (Appendix 6) was developed in four stages as outlined in Chapter 4 (literature; interview pilot; Phase 1 interviews and Phase 2 pilot). Mapping of the development of each resulting survey question appears in Appendix 5.

The electronic SRM was also amended by the survey pilot. Four respondents (n=10) requested the capacity to submit a total of less than 100% for overall value of their degree experience across academic, economic and personal, enabling attribution of the value to each that they felt they had gained rather than being forced to create a potentially false reflection of their perception. One graduate for example wanted to allocate economic value 0%, personal 60% and academic 25%. Forcing an attribution of 100% would have distorted the reality of his perception of value allocation and resulted in inaccurate reporting.

One pilot respondent expressed concerns with the Likert attitude scale:

*“What if I already had excellent communication skills before I went to university? That would mean that university added very little to my CS and it would look like a negative score (i.e. if you only give it a 1 or 0 for what university added).”*

This respondent has indicated precisely what the question is seeking – an indication of his value he perceived was added by his university degree.

The methodological instrument of the Likert attitude scale utilised recognised statements drawn from previous literature, Phase 1 pilot and interviews and coded them on a scale. Such scales tend to be familiar to participants and rarely require supervision or instruction making them ideal for an online survey. One disadvantage is that they can generate simplistic data rather than capturing complex attitudes. Weaving questions from responses obtained during Phase 1 together with the Phase 2 pilot responses into the survey was an attempt to reduce this concern, as was the incorporation of open text boxes enabling elaboration.

## 5.16 Phase 2 findings

The approaches taken and breadth of the initial work (outlined in Chapter Four) generated both quantitative and qualitative data. Respondent demographics appear in outline (Table 6) and in detail (Appendix 9).

Table 6. Demographics of respondents to the Phase 2 survey

Completed responses to online questionnaire	n=328 [of these n=202 studied at English HEIs]		
Gender	109 male	179 female	40 not disclosed
Graduation dates	Most recent in 2012	Most distant in 1970	
First generation in HE	141 first in family	146 not first in family	
Country of study	202 England	126 outside England	

It is the data from first degree graduates of English universities (n=202) which informs this study. Data from graduates completing their first degree outside England will be analysed separately for another study. Respondents had options not to respond to some questions, therefore the number of respondents is noted in all analysis.

In terms of institutional reach, respondents were grouped according to institutional mission groups as follows: Russell Group (institutions within the Russell Group at the time of the questionnaire being completed); Pre 92 institutions; Post 92 institutions; and the Open University. (Table 7).



Table 7. Breakdown of Phase 2 respondents by university mission group

Mission Group	Number of graduate respondents n=202
Post 92	101
Russell Group	56
Pre 92	40
Open University	5

Whilst the imbalance across the mission groups reflects the increasing numbers of students attending Post 92 universities, results in comparisons have been prepared in percentages of the responding population from each group in order to compare proportional responses.

Most respondents completed their degrees within the 2000s but there were graduates responding from the 1970s, 80s and also 90s (Table 8). Ages at the start of their undergraduate degree ranged from 17-18 years old to 51-60 years old. The sample was evenly divided between first generation in HE, and those who were not.

Table 8. Distance from degree at time of interview

Distance from degree	Number of graduate respondents n=202
0-2 years	30
3-5 years	33
6-10 years	40
11-15 years	29
16-20 years	23
21- 30 years	28
31-42 years	19

### 5.17 Component tools of perception of value employed in Phase 2

The OVS – Overall Value Score - was made up of four separate aspects of value included within the questionnaire:

The VAS – *Value Added Score* – described in 4.6.2 containing 16 questions drawn from previous research (McGivney, 2002 and Phase 1)

The AVI – *Academic Value Indicator* – described in 4.6.3 containing 10 questions specifically focusing on academic value drawn from Phase 1, CBI<sup>24</sup> and IoD<sup>25</sup>, and graduate attributes

The SRM – Self-Reported Measurement of Value Weighting described in 4.6.1

Two focused questions: *Do you feel your first degree has added value to you as an individual?* to which there was a Yes/No response, and a final optional text box area to *“identify the single most valuable element of your degree”*. In total 187 participants contributed to this free text box.

## 5.18 Phase 2 responses to the key research question:

### **What do graduates perceive to be the value/s of their degrees?**

Responses to the key research question of what value graduates perceive in their degrees were analysed utilising component elements of the OVS.

The research clearly indicated that across the decades in which responding graduates studied their degrees, perceptions of value were high (99.1%). Thus it is apparent that the majority of graduates responding to this study perceived value to themselves as a result of their degree study. Only two indicated that they perceived no value in their degree. The highest value in their degree was allocated to the academic element 40% (n=80) to which Phase 1 graduates allocated 35% (n=5.2). The highest value for Phase 1 graduates was personal 44% (n=6.6) and this was allocated the second highest value in Phase 2 37% (n=74) (Figure 22).

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<sup>24</sup> CBI – Confederation of British Industry.

<sup>25</sup> IoD – Institute of Directors.

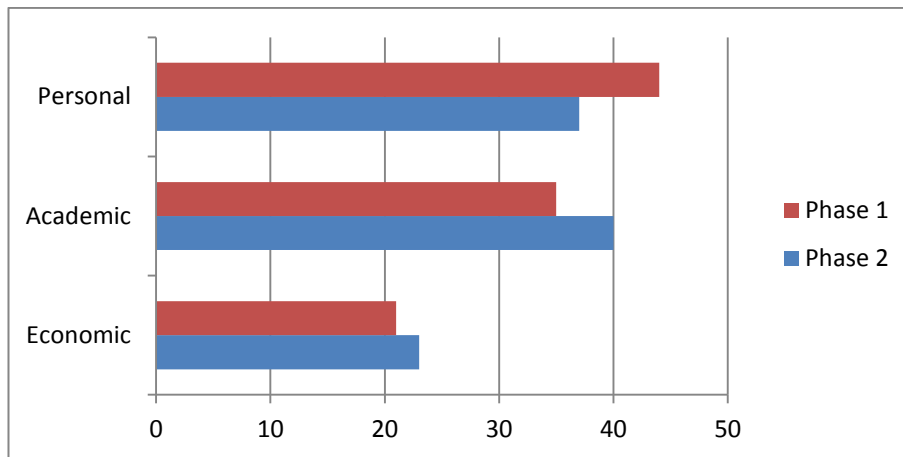


Fig.22. SRM (Self-reported Measurement) results for Phases 1 and 2 as percentage responses

Both Phase 1 and Phase 2 respondents allocated lowest value to the economic/financial element. Phase 2 saw 21% (n=42) graduates allocate value to the economic/financial element which was slightly smaller than the proportional allocation by Phase 1 graduates of 23% (n=3.5). Thus it can be seen that this was considerably lower than either academic or personal value perceptions in both phases.

Open text comments from Phase 2 graduates to the final question which asked them to identify the most important element from their degree which added value to them as individuals cast more light on their responses in economic/financial terms.

Of the 187 responding 7% (n=13) highlighted the economic/financial values added as being most important. Those 13 indicated that the economic potential of a degree had more value to them than purely financial earnings. Illustrative comments indicated value perceived of a degree as an enabler:

*“Stepping stone to other things.”*

*“My degree was entirely funded by my employer. Upon completion of my degree my income increased by 50%.”*

*“I drifted for 10 years before getting a vocation to become a mathematics teacher. At the time I studied I did not think I would ever use that part of my degree (I did it for enjoyment) but if I had not done so becoming a teacher would have been much harder.”*

*“Just having a degree has been a door opener.”*

*“Having a degree in general is a minimum requirement for all jobs. “*

*“Gave me self-confidence and financial security.”*

*“Employability and earning potential.”*

*“It was my ticket to a higher paid job, but that’s what I did it for.”*

Some graduates identified that it might have been possible to achieve their career goals without a degree.

*“The prestige of having a degree has enabled me to get chances in jobs I would not have broken into so easily without one.”*

*“I often wonder if I’d have been better off going straight into work.”*

In terms of career advancement the inability of graduates to identify whether their degree had made a difference to their trajectory led many to question its value:

*“I haven’t ever been out of work but I put that down to experience rather than my degree.”*

Financially a degree emerged for two graduates as having a negative impact:

*“I actually earn less now than I did 12 years ago.”*

*“My student loans are still being paid back and I am worse off than before I did my degree.”*

Others considered the financial potential of a degree unimportant:

*“My degree could have led to great financial reward but I chose not to pursue that.”*

*“I don’t put much value in the financial.”*

*“I regard studying and my choice of career as a vocation.”*

The interlinking of academic and economic as well as the importance of reflection to realise value was also apparent from some like this respondent:

*“I didn’t realise it at the time, but due to my work now, I realise that I gained a lot of project management skills during university; time management, working on multiple projects, managing people, working to deadlines, working with a range of people (and skill levels) and communication skills.”*

Academic value was highlighted by 22% (45) graduates:

*"Practical skills and knowledge."*

*"My grade - I achieved a First which was a great reward for the hard work I put in."*

*"It demanded intellectual curiosity and rigour of thought from me."*

*"Ability to process large amounts of information and generate my own ideas from that in a very short time."*

*"It widened my horizons and introduced me to ways of knowing and thinking about the world that I had never encountered before."*

*"Having to really work for results and the commitment I needed to complete things to a standard which I could be proud of".*

However academic learning was subject to evaluation as might be expected of critically-thinking graduates:

*"I studied towards a degree in a subject which I wasn't aware of before I applied and thought the University will teach me all I needed to know. The 'dryness' of teaching made me hate xxx and I don't think I'll ever work in that field because I don't feel I've got the knowledge necessary to pursue it. I did, however, learn something from being introduced to all the theories brought up in classes and I believe this knowledge helps me make every day choices."*

*"Because of my grades it hasn't landed me where I wanted."*

A total of 117 (62.6%) of graduates responding in the open text area emphasised they considered the most value added to them by their degree came from the personal development which they categorised in a variety of ways including individual identity development

*"Confidence in myself."*

*"Self-worth."*

*"Confidence in my own abilities."*

*"Gaining independence and living on my own."*

*"Added to self-belief. "*

For others the social element of the personal was emphasised as the most important value:

*“Being away from home allowed me to develop as a person outside of my family. Meeting people from a wide variety of backgrounds greatly increases your awareness of how other people’s lives contrast with your own.”*

*“Making new friends with people from different backgrounds, learning who I was, being independent. “*

*“Living away from home.”*

*“My development of social skills, making friends and becoming more used to people, meeting people and living with/dealing with people. making female friends (i came from an all-boys school) and becoming less apathetic to the human race.”*

*“Confidence to go out and do things; that I was equal and worthy to them. My private schooling while I loved it, was on 'assisted place' and I was treated as an underdog. University made me the same as everyone else, judged on mental ability.”*

*“The friends I made.”*

*“Made me feel able to communicate better with others (at all levels).”*

Looking at a degree in this way enables consideration of a broader picture rather than the compartmentalised and often narrow or shallow view of either employability/graduate premium or student experience sporting/social life approaches. The opportunity to reflect on the value resulting from a degree led to the expression of profound and clear evaluation. The format of Phase 2 as a survey alone did not result as was feared in narrowing of perception due to participant use of the free text boxes. These resulted in some pithy but powerful testimony of the value individuals recognised in their degree experiences.

*“My degree increased my self-belief – in academic terms, career terms and socially.”*

*“Going to university as a mature student after a 20 year absence in the education sector changed my life, opened me up as a person, developed my passion for learning.”*

*“I suppose what changed me most was the way of looking at society as if from the outside which my degree programme developed.”*

*“It changed my life in every way.”*

*“Increased autonomy and independence that led to increased self-awareness, esteem, confidence that led to better social and political awareness that led to eventual career pathway.”*

## 5.19 Responses to the Research Objectives

*Research objective:*

### **Where do graduates perceive value or a lack of value within their degrees?**

In Phase 1 graduates identified three specific areas of particular value to them, and four areas where they perceived little value. (Table 9) More detail was available from Phase 2 graduates, because of the greater numbers of respondents but also through employment of the Value Added Score and the Academic Value Indicator. These AVI and VAS results were reflected across all mission groups represented.

Table 9 Areas of value perception arising from both phases of the research

	Highest value	Lowest value
Phase 1	Personal independence Knowledge of own capabilities qualifications	Political awareness Self-criticality Skills to get first job Community involvement
Phase 2	VAS – Knowledge of own capabilities Tolerance  AVI Subject knowledge	VAS – Team/group working skills  AVI – Team/group working skills Leadership skills

These findings were drawn from the results of the respective tools which enabled graduates to construct their allocation of value within each of the areas.

*Research objective:*

### **What factors can be established as influencing or potentially influencing graduate perceptions of value within their university degree experience.**

Phase 1 indicated that entry motivation was strongly related to overall perception of value and identified differences depending on whether it was externally or internally driven. Graduates whose primary motivation to study at university resulted from the expectations of others (parents and teachers particularly) tended to have lower allocations of value, and identified more strongly with the personal value of the experience rather than economic or academic advantages.

Table 10 Additional factors identified in Phase 1 as impacting upon perceptions of value:

Personal factors influencing value perception	Academic factors influencing value perception	Economic/financial factors influencing value perception
Recognition of degree by peers, family, and/or self	Degree Classification	Recognition of degree by employer/s
Expectational pressures from family, teachers, discipline, institution and/or self	Classification related to expectation	Application of degree in employment
Student lifestyle	Flexibility of study	Work to earn during learning
Extra-curricular involvement	Continuation of study with postgraduate or professional qualifications	

Phase 2 analysis focused on establishing whether the importance seen in Phase 1 of the relationship between entry motivation and overall perception of value was evident in a larger study. Entry motivation was determined in the survey by responses to whether students chose to take a degree because it was expected of them; for personal aspiration; specific career goals, for other reasons or for combinations of these. Phase 2 analysis explored relationships between entry motivations and Overall Value Score (defined in 5.11).

The association between these six entry motivation groupings and overall value score was analysed using a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test to see whether there was a statistically significant difference between these motivation groups and OVS. The results are illustrated in Figure 23 and shown in Table 11.



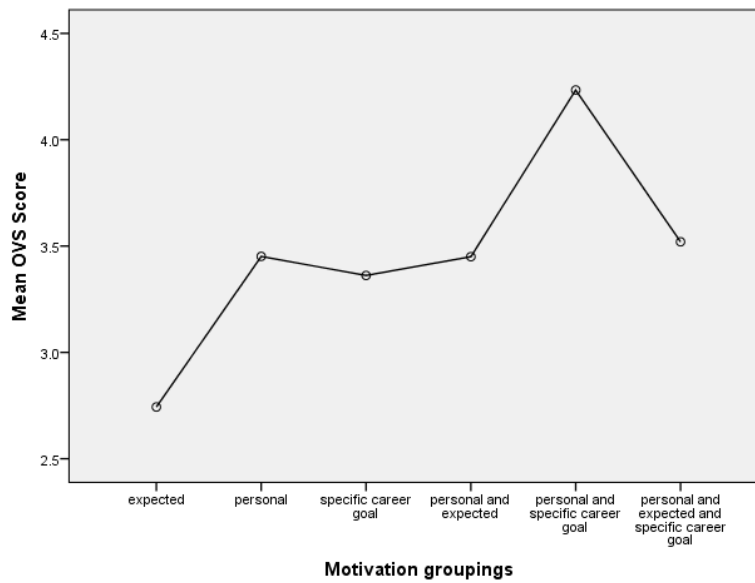


Fig. 23 Relationship of entry motivation with Overall Value Score

Table 11 Descriptive statistics for relationship between entry motivational groupings and OVS

Motivation groupings	Mean OVS score	Standard deviation	n=
Expected	2.74	.980	30
Personal	3.45	.898	90
Specific career goal	3.36	1.00	30
Personal and expected	3.45	.656	25
Personal and specific career goal	4.23	.467	10
Personal, expected and specific career goal	3.52	.948	15
Total	3.38	.935	200

The test showed that the relationship between value scores and entry motivation was significant. The null hypothesis that this relationship was the outcome of mere chance was rejected  $\chi^2(5) = 25.546$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . This clearly identified higher perceptions of value among those whose motivation to enter their undergraduate degree was personal aspiration combined with a specific career goal which required a degree. Those who perceived the lowest value in their degree experience were those who considered their only motivation in going to university had been to satisfy the expectations of others (Figure 23).

A non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test also showed statistically significant differences between motivation groupings and the Academic Value Indicator [  $X^2(5) = 21.236, p \leq .001$ ]. The results are shown in Table 12 and illustrated in Figure 24.

Table 12 Descriptive statistics for relationship between entry motivational groupings and AVI

Motivation correlation with AVI	Mean AVI score	Standard deviation	N=200
Expected	3.97	2.29	30
Personal	6.01	5.58	90
Specific career goal	4.83	1.94	30
Personal and expected	4.76	1.94	25
Personal and specific career goal	6.80	2.04	10
Personal, expected and specific career goal	6.27	1.67	15
Total	5.43	4.15	200

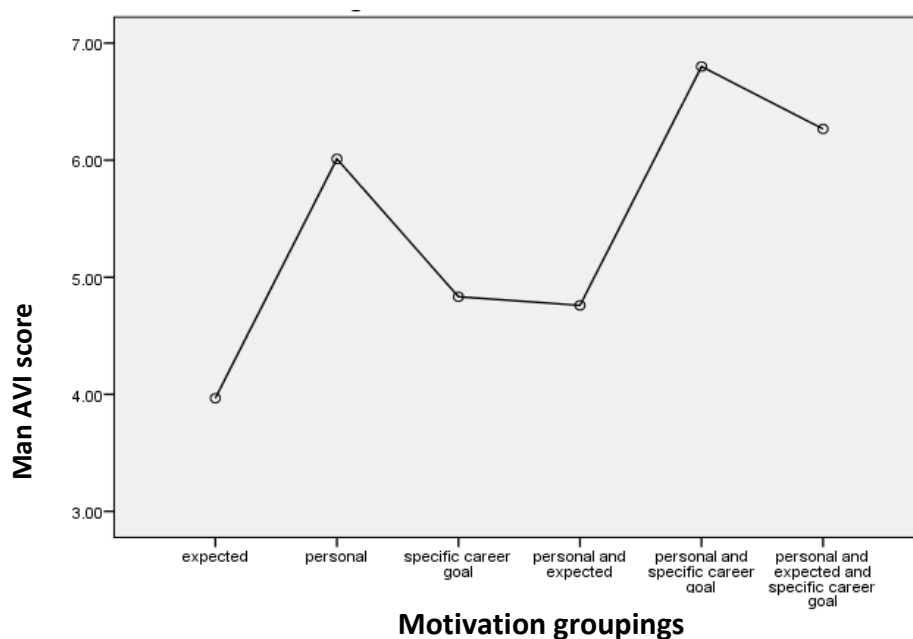


Fig. 24 Relationship of entry motivation with Academic Value Indicator Score

Again it can be seen that those graduates entering their degree for reasons of personal aspiration combined with specific career goals requiring a degree perceived highest value on indication of academic experience values (6.80 against a mean of 5.43). Equally those who considered their motivation in going

to university had been to meet the expectations of others recorded the lowest perceptions of academic value (3.97 against a mean of 5.43).

Of the 10 indicating this combination of high motivational categorisation, four were mature students. Comments from these graduates indicated the clear drivers behind realisation of value in their degree experience as in these examples:

*“My marriage was going downhill, and I wanted to be able to support myself and my children financially.”*

*“Personal aspiration and enhance my skills for current post with NHS.”*

The AVI indicated three motivation groupings recording above the mean of the combined Academic Value Indicator score. These were graduates who as students had been motivated by personal aspiration; personal aspiration combined with specific career goals and expectations of others; and those motivated by personal aspiration and specific career goals.

The common factor of personal aspiration may indicate that those personally inspired to attend university are more focused on and thus more aware of the academic elements of the experience. However this was not borne out by the SRM academic value allocation (Figure 28). This shows the allocation of academic value highest among these groups with the exception of those whose entry motivation was personal aspiration and the expectations of others. Textual comments indicated that within this latter group intrinsic drivers may have resulted more from desperation than aspiration:

*“Not ready for the real world!”*

*“I wanted to continue studying after my A levels – probably defer getting a job!”*

*“Didn’t know what else to do and it was expected of me, but I wanted to do something.”*

### **SRM and entry motivation**

A Kruskal-Wallis test was run on graduates’ allocation of value utilising the Self-reported Measurement (SRM). As can be seen from Table 13 the relationship

between each of the elements and the SRM allocations of graduates were statistically significant.

Those graduates whose entry motivation was a specific career goal allocated the highest perception to economic value, whilst those recording the lowest financial/economic value were those motivated by personal aspiration and the expectations of others (Figure 25).

Table 13. Descriptive statistics for relationship between motivational groupings and the three SRM elements.

	SRM/ economic	SRM/personal	SRM/academic
Chi-Square	19.534	16.875	9.565
Df	5	5	5
p value	.002	.005	.089

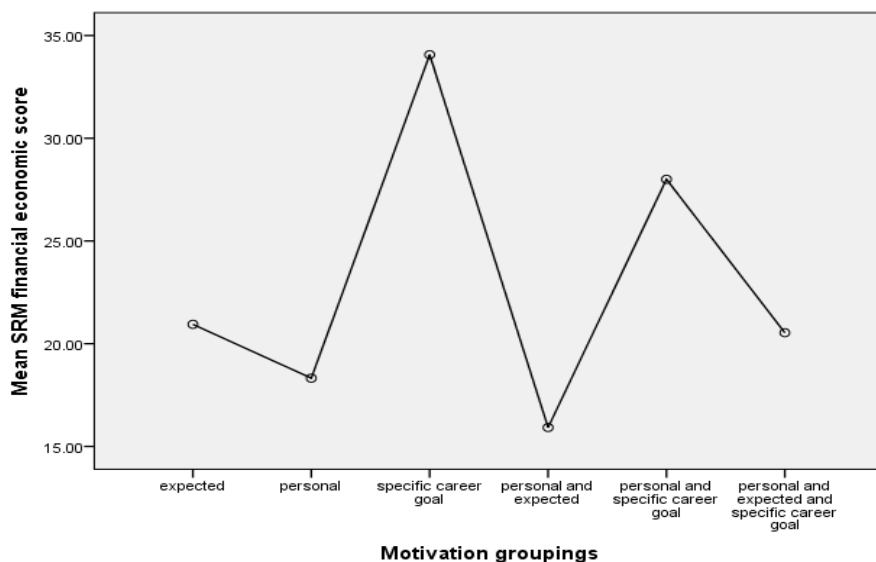


Fig. 25 SRM economic/financial value allocation relationship to motivation groupings

This picture was reversed when examining allocation of personal value. Highest perception was recorded by those whose entry motivation was personal aspiration and expectations of others. Lowest personal value perception was recorded by those with only a specific career goal (Figure.26).

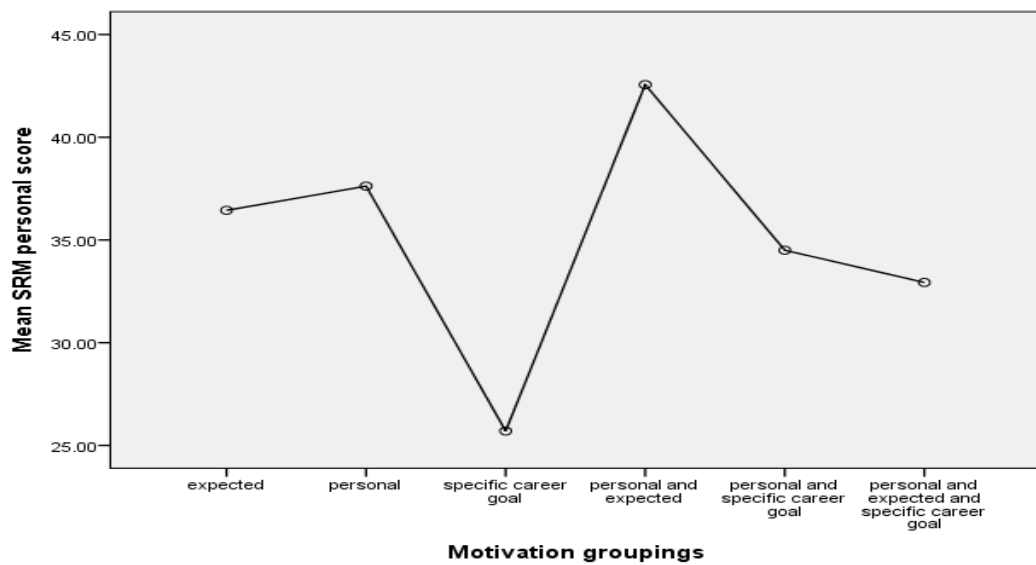


Fig. 26 SRM personal value allocation relationship to motivation groupings

In terms of allocation of value to the academic (knowledge and skills) aspect of their degree graduates motivated by personal aspiration alone recorded the highest perception of value. Those for whom motivation was a combination of personal, expected and a specific career goal also recorded highly. Those for whom entry was motivated by the expectation of others alone recorded the lowest (Figure 27).

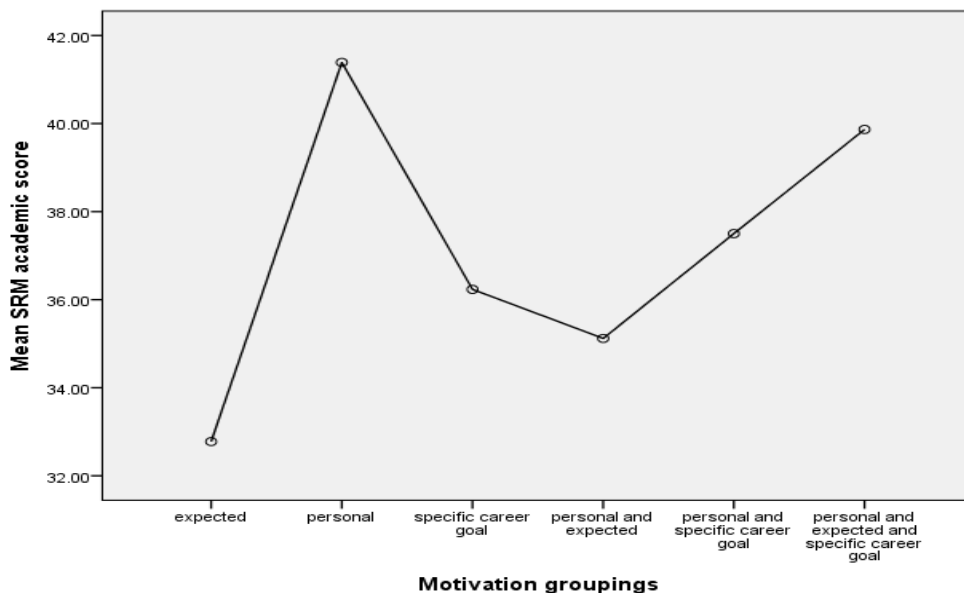


Fig. 27 SRM academic value allocation relationship to motivation groupings

*Research objective:*

**How does distance from graduation or institutional mission group appear to influence graduate perceptions of value**

For the purpose of this evaluation graduate perceptions of value were taken from the SRM, AVI and OVS. Key dates were used as division points for the respondent cohort: 1998 when fees were first charged in UK universities in the sum of £1,000, and 2004 when fees rose to £3,000. Thus responses were grouped pre 1998 (starting in 1971 when the first respondent graduated); 1998 to 2004, and post 2004 until 2013 when the survey was conducted.

Comparing distance to value allocation indicated no significant statistical difference suggesting graduates' perceptions of value allocation had remained relatively constant over the 42 year period examined (Table 14).

Table 14 Graduate perceptions of value compared to distance from degree experience

	SRM Economic	SRM Academic	SRM Personal	AVI out of maximum score of 9	OVS out of maximum score of 75	n=200
1971- 1998	22.6	32.65	33.85	4.9	51.21	70
1998- 2004	24.16	37.64	28.33	5.2	56.4	36
2004- 2013	15.79	36.21	34.11	5.1	55.9	94

This seems surprising given the huge investment in the marketisation of higher education over the decades reflected within this study. However it is apparent that there is no significant change in perception of value among graduates despite their differing distances from graduation. This indicates that the perception of value within higher education is sustained and to some extent constant with the allocation of the economic/financial value lowest across the decades behind academic and personal value. It is also significant that the most recent cohort to graduate perceived the lowest economic value. This may be indicative of an enduring, developing perception of value of higher education.

Consideration of the economic SRM alone appears to reflect media headlines indicating falls in perceived economic/financial value but examining the academic and particularly the personal value tells a different story indicating a rising perception of value in findings across both phases of study. Whether indicative of a change in expectation, influences of a change in rhetoric, or a genuine change in reality cannot be definitively demonstrated from this study, although the OVS appears to indicate the latter. This could be an interesting area for further study.

Closer examination of the data identified two male graduates considered their degree valuable but recorded very low academic experiences were both 18 years from graduation and from the same institution although they had studied there within different disciplines. Their findings may indicate a quality issue at that institution at that time<sup>26</sup>

#### *Research objective*

**Identify how value perceived within these graduate perceptions reflects or aligns with HE policy**

As seen in Chapter Two the hegemonic political discourse and related policy has surrounded the value of a degree being articulated strongly in economic/financial terms. Within Phase 2 only 5% (n=10) graduates considered the economic/financial to be the most valuable SRM element of their degree. This aligned with the results of Phase 1 where only one graduate (6%) placed economic/financial highest in his SRM.

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<sup>26</sup> More recent graduates from that institution also responded to the survey and their responses did not mirror the results of these two.

## 5.20 Summary of relationship of Phase 2 findings to Phase 1 areas arising

- Responding to the research question and objectives has identified that graduates in both phases placed lowest value on the economic/financial value of their degree. This is not in line with the political hegemony surrounding higher education.
- Graduates whose entry motivation was intrinsic recorded higher perceptions of value than those whose entry motivation was expectation of others.
- Graduates in Phase 2 indicated academic value as most important whilst more graduates in interviews emphasised the personal value.
- Graduates demonstrated a propensity to see academic value in terms of content, but the importance of academic relationships was evident from free text comments.
- Only 3.5% (n=7) unemployed graduates responded in Phase 2. Only one commented that their unemployment was a negative factor in degree value terms. The resulting sample was seen as too small to inform conclusions.
- No statistical significance was shown in comparison of OV or AVI with institutional mission group.
- The Russell Group data included responses from a small number of Oxbridge graduates (n=9). The Open University, whilst it was valuable to have responses from graduates resulted in too small a number to analyse separately in a meaningful manner (n=5). Thus these graduates formed part of the Pre 92 institutional responses (Appendix 9).
- Only 1% (n=2) responded negatively to the question *Do you feel your first degree has added value to you as an individual?* Both whilst articulating no perceived value added to them personally by their degrees saw some benefit in part/s of the experience as their comments indicated:



*“Hated every minute of it but taught me I wasn’t as great as I thought I was.”*

*“It was a strong motivator to me moving out of the family home and the safety and security that it provided. This to me is the main benefit of a university undergrad course – it acts as a buffer to certain people to allow them to move away from their family and become independent, but in a controlled and safe manner. The educational aspects are secondary. “*

- A further nine graduates recorded no value in elements of the VAS or the AVI but recorded positive value in the penultimate question. Eight of these had entry motivation of external expectations alone which put their results in line with the findings that external expectation alone has a reductionary impact on overall value perception.

#### **A10 - Russell Group indicator or outlier?**

The responses from all Russell Group participants in Phase 2 (n=56) were compared with those from A10 whose responses appeared at variance with other interviewees in Phase 1.

Six of these graduates recorded parental expectations as the main reason for entering higher education at a Russell Group university and all recorded lower SRM, AVI and OVS scores compared to their peers. All were working at the time of completing the survey but two like A10 were not working in the areas of their degree and they also recorded very low scores. Unlike A10 none had been working to earn during their degree although overall a total of 23 of the Russell Group graduates indicated they had worked to earn throughout their degree and this appeared to have no significant impact on their SRM, AVI or OVS.

Like A10 five of the six who identified entry motivation as parental expectations articulated some positive value in the experience in individual ways.

*“Learning from tutors who seemed to be good quality – having weekly tutorials with them with just one other student gave me a sense of being valued (even though I know my essays were painfully bad). It probably improved my self-confidence.”*

*“The experience of university and not just my academic studies made me the person I am today. Being away from home allowed me to develop as a person outside of my family.”*

*“Meeting people from a wide variety of backgrounds greatly increases your awareness of how other people’s lives contrast with your own.”*

*“The prestige of having a degree has enabled me to get chances in jobs I would not have broken into so easily without one.”*

*“Times spent with fellow students.”*

*“I think making the break from home/family ties. Increasing self-sufficiency and independence accompanied by university years.”*

It was concluded that A10 was an outlier in that his responses, arising from genuinely held belief and personal truth of his own perceived experience, were not recorded by others.

### **5.21 Impact of higher than expected classifications on value perceptions (as measured by OVS)**

In Phase 1 two interviewees indicated that achieving higher than expected final classifications led them to question the value of their degrees. It was not the classification but how it related to what they considered their final classification deserved to be. They indicated that imbalance between classification and expectation when the final classification was higher than their expectation had diminished their allocation of value in academic and overall terms and also negatively influenced their recommendation of a degree and the specific course they had taken. These represent values as drivers of behaviour (Rokeach, 1973; Sheth et al, 1991; Stafford, 1994). They may also be indicators of degree inflation, the subject of considerable discussion among policy makers, the HE sector and the media over many years (Elton, 2004; Royce Sadler, 2009; Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee, 2009; Paton, 2014).

Discussions have centred around the impact of rankings and market competition creating resultant risk in devaluing degree credibility:

*“... less benign forces are at work with the potential to damage the UK higher education brand.”* (Johnson, Speech, 2015)

In Phase 2, analysis explored the relationship of expected and realised final classification to the Overall Value Score in the four identified groupings (Table 15). A Kruskal-Wallis test indicated no statistical significance in graduates’ perception of value (OVS scores) and their expectations of degree outcome  $X^2(3) = 3.792, p \leq 0.285$ .

Table 15 Value (OVS) relationship between final classification and how it related to expectation

Final classification to expectation	Mean	N
Higher	98.68	36
Lower	88.49	45
As expected	109.03	81
Not sure	98.26	38
Total		200

### **OVS as an indicator of graduate recommendations**

The ways graduates’ overall value scores influenced how they acted as ambassadors for degrees, for the institutions from which they graduated and the courses which they studied was analysed statistically in Phase 2 after it arose as apparently significant within Phase 1. Phase 2 explored recommendation within three questions:

*Would you recommend others to do a degree?*

*Would you recommend the institution that you went to to others?*

*Would you recommend your specific degree course to others?*

Each question provided a Likert scale response option plus an optional text box. Following Phase 1 the question was specifically phrased as to ‘do’ a degree to avoid potential implications of emphasis within the act of the degree such as study, read for, and ‘experience’.

A Spearman's correlation was undertaken to determine the relationship between Overall Value Scores and graduates' recommendations. This indicated a positive correlation (Table 16) between recommendation of a degree and OVS (= .175, n=200, p < .007) recommendation for institution (= .273, n=200, p< .000) and academic course (= .279, n=200, p< .000).

Table 16 Correlation between OVS and graduate likelihood to recommend their experience

Spearman's	Correlation Coefficient	Sig (1-tailed)	n=200
Recommend a degree	.175	.007	200
Recommend institution (alma mater)	.273	.000	200
Recommend course	.279	.000	200

These findings have been visually illustrated in scatter grams Figs. 28, 29 and 30.

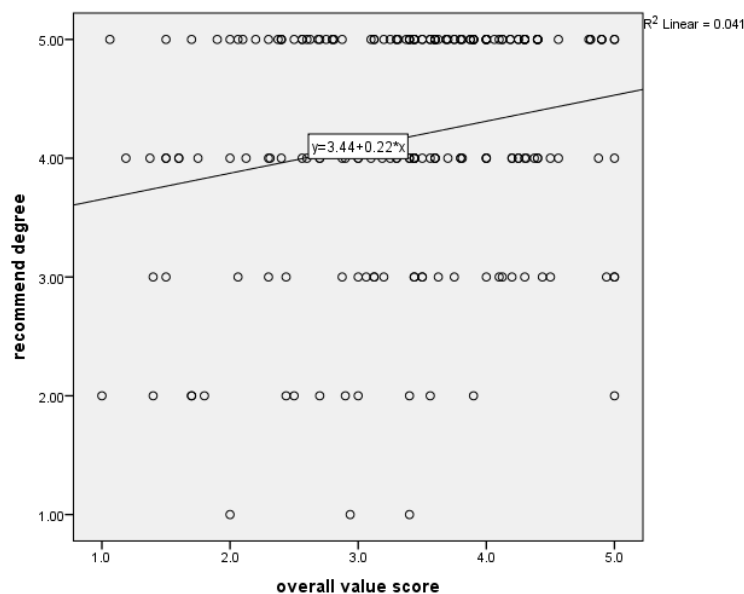


Fig. 28 Overall Value Score relationship to graduate recommendation of a degree

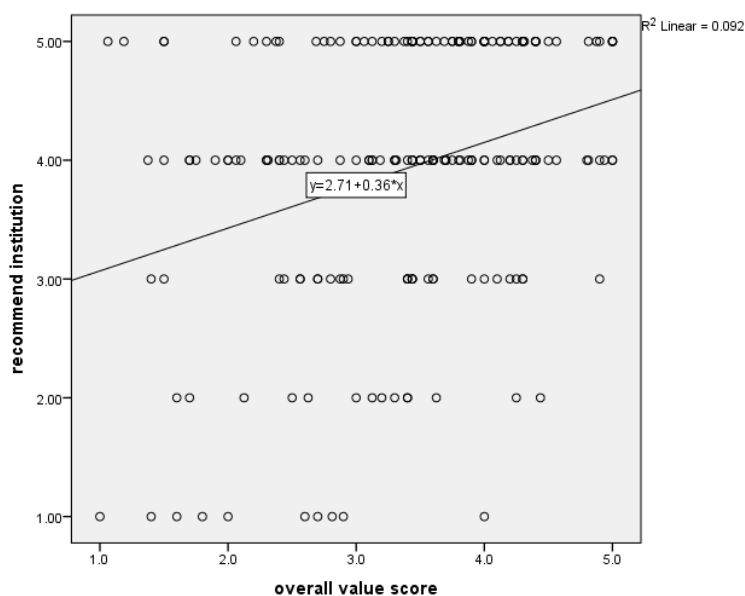


Fig. 29 Overall Value Score relationship to graduate recommendation of institution attended

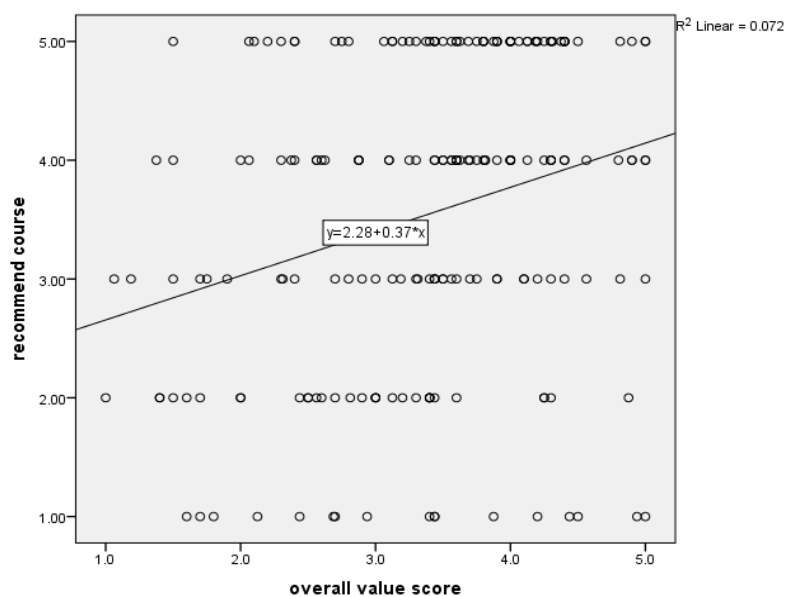


Fig. 30 Overall Value Score relationship to graduate recommendation of course studied

### Detail arising from graduate recommendations of a degree, their institution and their course.

Graduate responses to recommendation questions were divided into distance groupings according to the funding changes outlined in Chapter Three. As can be seen (Figure 31) a higher percentage of graduates paying £3,000+ per year for

their degree post 2004 would definitely recommend a degree to others. This group also recorded the highest number of graduates saying they would probably not recommend a degree. This may indicate higher criticality induced by fee payment, which could be in line with Callender's 2008 findings that higher costs were seen as debt rather than investment.

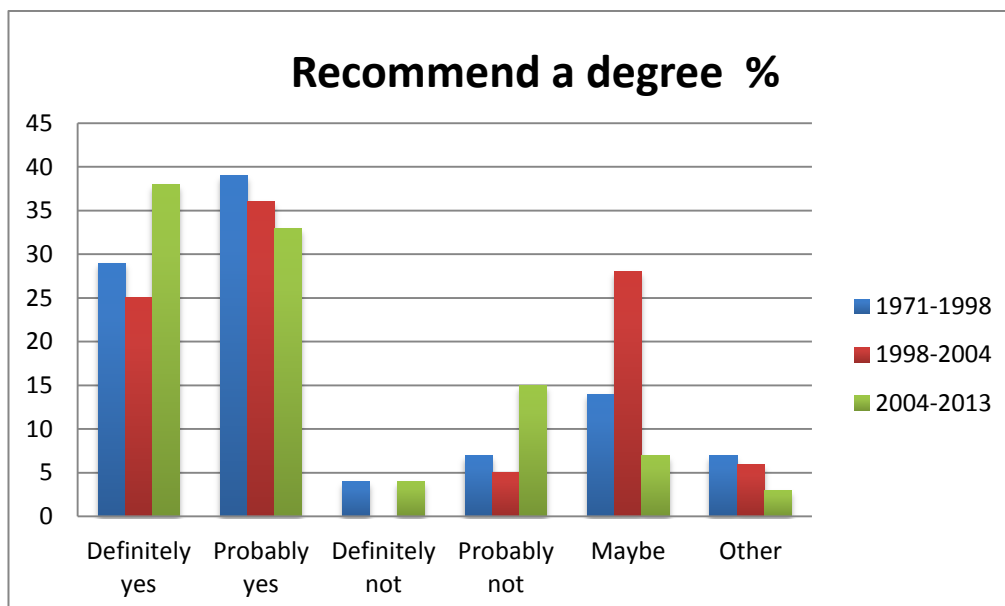


Fig. 31 Graduate recommendations of a degree according to distance

Thirty three graduates chose to elaborate their answers and their comments indicated 12 would only recommend a degree if required for a specific career, whilst 6 considered the rising cost of degrees demanded serious evaluation by prospective students. Twenty three graduates considered blanket recommendations unhelpful saying recommendations should be personalised for each prospective student.

Recommendations for their institution appeared strong among graduates at all distances from graduation but had risen since the 1998 introduction of tuition fees. However as can be seen (Figure 32) post 2004 graduates were both more positive and more negative in their recommendations indicating polarity of responses.

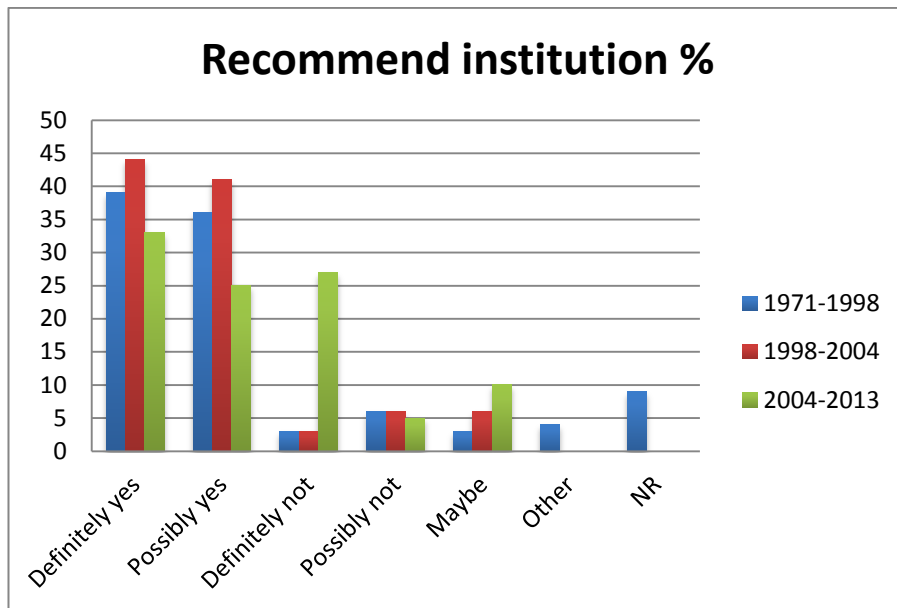


Fig. 32 Graduate recommendations of their institution according to distance

The need to consider individual aspirations when recommending a degree course to a prospective student was reflected in comments from ten graduates. More post 2004 graduates said they would definitely recommend their course (Figure 33), although the comments made it apparent that careful consideration of course content was required to enable future students to make the right choice as:

*“Yes I would recommend it but with more counselling on course choices”.*

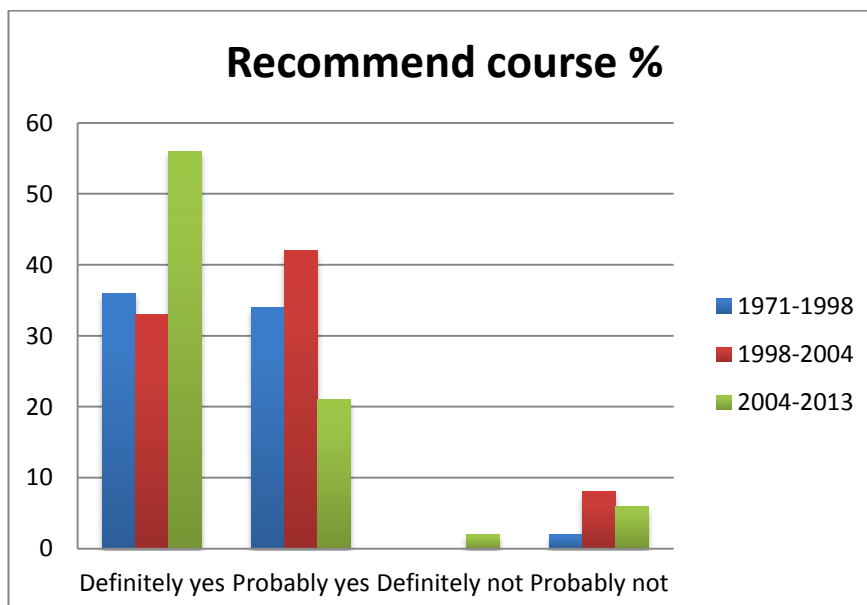


Fig. 33 Graduate recommendations of their degree course according to distance

## 5.22 Additional aspects arising from Phase 2

### **Life experience value**

'Life experience' emerged within the personal values of the open text final comments as being of value to 40 graduates. However most of these queried whether it was necessary to attend university to achieve this benefit. This will be addressed within Chapter Six.

### **Community importance**

A sense of belonging and engagement in a focused community arose within the free text responses to be the most valuable aspect of their degree for 35% (n=70) graduates from all mission groups. This aligns with Yorke's (2014) work on belonging and recognises that communities of practice are recognised as important developers and drivers of both learning and knowledge (Gee, 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The teacher/student relationship is recognised at all levels of education as important for achievement and motivation in academic and social development (Bandura, 1996; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The importance of not only tutor-led but peer-led learning has become a significant move within higher education providing challenge and support as well as additional developmental learning opportunities becoming a feature of academic communities (Mazur 1997, 2009; Malm et al, 2012; Ody & Carey, 2013; Hilsdon, 2014; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014).

No institutional pattern suggesting that learning communities are more powerful or better established in one institutional group over another was indicated by the findings. However comments indicated that it was not how these learning communities had developed, but how they were sustained and the quality of that continuity which was valued. Graduates talked of increased learning and developing criticality within their academic work, as well of changing perspectives and transforming their ideas, predominantly through discussion within the community of academics and peers. The value in these learning communities was recognised as being predominantly academic but also carrying personal and economic value:

- *"It widened my horizons and introduced me to ways of knowing and thinking about the world that I had never encountered before."*



- *“The opportunity to work with a fantastic supervisor who broadened my mind academically and politically and has since become a dear friend.”*
- *“The whole course/university experience broadened my horizons and helped me become more open-minded and understanding.”*
- *“The new experiences and setting it provided to meet people and discuss ideas.”*
- *“Being able to spend large amounts of time talking to peers, in an inquisitive environment.”*
- *“The ability to express myself and to explore interesting ideas within an innovative work environment that was world leading.”*
- *“I suppose what changed me most was the way of looking at society as if from the outside which my degree programme developed.”*

For others the communities of practice of which they became a part by being students and where they learned were professional, and in many cases remained into their careers supporting their transition into employment. This was particularly predominant humanities graduates who indicated professional practice leading to enhanced employability as of significant value:

- *“”Working alongside other artists.”*
- *“Availability of opportunities running alongside course due to location and links with external agencies.”*

For a third group their communities of practice were social or personal, often connected to the Students’ Union, developing themselves as individuals or as part of a group:

- *“Personal and professional networks that I set up both with my classmates and the staff of the University.”*

This move to see the student as a contributor to their degree experience is perhaps a result of the change in expectations within higher education. The alteration in expectations creating the possibility that whilst students were being viewed in a different light (as consumers) they were also being given participation opportunities which had not previously existed within higher education, and these combined with the changing expectations of a fee-paying environment may have led them to regard their own role differently.

### 5.23 Recognition of Higher Education as transformation

For some the transformational element highlighted by Mezirow (1991, 1995, 1996, 2000) was the most important value within their degree experience:

*“Going to university as a mature student after a 20 year absence in the education sector changed my life, opened me up as a person, developed my passion for learning.”*

*“It changed my life in every way.”*

*“Opening up new vistas onto the world.”*

*“The experience of University and not just my academic studies made me the person I am today.”*

*“I left University as a free-thinking adult, which is probably not a good description of me on arrival.”*

*“I suppose it was just the simple realisation that I could fundamentally change the academic and social direction which my life was travelling in. I was an agent of change and not a powerless passenger.”*

*“As a mature student, previously a 'stay at home parent', and the first in my family to go to university, I cannot put a value on the way the experience increased my self-esteem, self-confidence etc. - priceless! “*

*“Enjoyment of the subject for its own sake & as taught by leaders in the field. Enjoyment doesn't seem to have featured directly in this questionnaire at all and while I know that employability etc. is important I think that given the current economic climate it's all the more important that people study something they really enjoy as there are (for most) no guarantees re employment.”*

### 5.24 Limitations of analysis and interpretation of results

The number of variables and permutations arising meant that achieving statistical significance was made more difficult. A greater focus on one or two variables could have enabled more meaningful data which in turn could have generated more significant findings, although one value of this study and one way it brings new knowledge is through the breadth which it indicates. Knowing that graduate value is multifaceted and influenced by a number of factors prevents over simplified evaluation.

## Summary of Chapter Five Part B

This section has outlined the development of the Phase 2 survey and responses resulting from 202 graduates who studied for their undergraduate degree in an English university. These findings are summarised thus:

- The Phase 2 SRM results indicated that a larger population of graduates reflected the lowest perception of value allocation to economic/financial aspects as seen among Phase 1 graduates.
- Statistical significance was identified in the impact of external pressures influencing motivation to undertake a degree, with the subsequent perceptions of value. Graduates who as students expected, often by familial pressures, to take a degree recorded the lowest perception of value, whilst the highest perception of value was recorded by those motivated by personal aspirations combined with specific career goals.
- No significant connection was indicated by the responses of unemployed graduates to their employment status influencing their value perceptions.
- Distance from the experience was seen to have little changed value perceptions.
- Achieving a higher than expected degree classification was suggested by Phase 1 to reduce the overall value perceptions of graduates but this was refuted by results from Phase 2.
- A significant positive correlation was identified between graduates' Overall Value Scores and their positive recommendations of a degree, of their alma mater and of their academic course.
- A sense of belonging to a Community of Practice emerged as being powerful, as did recognition of the transformational power of higher education for some graduates.

## Concluding Summary of Chapter Five results

Table 17. Comparative summary of the reported findings from both phases.

	Phase 1	Phase 2
How do graduates attribute value	All graduates attributed value somewhere in their degree	99.1% attributed value somewhere in their degree
How do graduates attribute value across the academic/economic and personal elements of their degree	Respondents from both phases placed the economic/financial value lowest (Phase 2 – 23%/ Phase 1 -21%)	
	Personal highest 44% Academic 35%	Academic highest 40% Personal 37%
How does this relate to the hegemonic discourse influencing HE policy and funding?	Results from both studies indicated similar percentages 5-6% of graduates agreed with the hegemonic discourse of economic/financial value as being most significant.	
What is the impact of external and intrinsic pressure on entry motivation on perceptions of value?	Phase 1 indicated this as an area of research for Phase 2	Statistical significance identified between Overall Value Score and entry motivation.  Highest value perceptions - entry motivation of personal (internal) motivation and specific career goals (both internal and external).  Lowest value scores - external only
How do graduates specifically address academic value ( AVI)	Not specifically separated but: highest: knowledge of own capabilities  lowest: self-criticality	Highest value: subject knowledge  Lowest value: team/group working skills and leadership skills
Do value perceptions vary among employed	No statistical significance was identified in relation to employment. However of the 7 unemployed graduates	

and unemployed graduates?	who responded all indicated value in some elements of their degree experience.	
What patterns of perceptions of value appear related to part time students and those living at home?	Part time students and those living at home indicated particularly low value in community involvement	Identified as an area for further study
Are patterns evident among graduates who perceived no value in their degrees?	No statistical significance was identified in relation to the 11 graduates indicating no value in either the VAS and AVI scores (9) or the final question did you perceive value in your degree (2)	
Did graduates recording higher than expected classifications also record any patterns in value reduction?	No statistical significance was identified In the relationship between those graduates who achieved higher than expected classifications and value allocations; or higher expectations compared to propensity to recommend; or higher expectations compared to entry motivation.	
What is the relationship between value recommendations post degree and distance from degree?	Phase 1 indicated this as an area of research for Phase 2	Post 2004 graduates were more likely to definitely recommend a degree Post 2004 graduates were more divided on definitely recommending their institutions or definitely not recommending (33%:27%) 1998-2004 graduates were more likely to recommend their alma mater More post 2004 graduates were likely to recommend their course
What is the relationship between graduates' overall value scores (OVS) and their recommendations for a degree, for their institution and their course?	Phase 1 indicated this as an area of development for Phase 2	Statistically significant correlation was shown between high OVS and likelihood to recommend in degree, institution and course. This was particularly strong in terms of OVS and institutional recommendation and OVS and course recommendation.

## **Chapter Six: Evaluation of Findings arising from research into the graduate voice**

Chapter Five looked at What emerged from the research in line with Dewey's (1993) recognition that reflection is vital to achieve understanding and learning, and the reflective prompts of What – So What – Now What? (Borton, 1970; Rolfe et al, 2001) this chapter continues the process of reflection asking So What has been learned from this research? It places the findings within a theoretical context, and identifies how the graduate voice which was articulated in Chapter Five contributes to existing knowledge about the degree experience within higher education. Chapter Seven will focus on the next stage in this reflective cycle asking Now What?

### **6.0 So what did the graduate voice reveal?**

The study showed that 99.1% of research participants (n=217) considered there was value in their degree and that this did not significantly change with distance from the experience or the institution attended.

Graduate allocation of value however indicated a breadth of perceived value which was more extensive than the hegemonic economic/political cost-benefit equation which has developed over the past 5 decades.

Intrinsic and/or extrinsic entry motivation was seen to have significant impact on perceptions of value and this was relevant across all entry points – whether graduates were paying tuition fees or not.

Self-authorship during the degree appeared to enhance or develop perceptions of value.

The graduate voice has implications for the future of higher education. Graduates who valued their experience most were more likely to be positive ambassadors for higher education, their own institution and their course.

The research clearly indicated that across the decades in which responding graduates studied their degrees, perceptions of value were high (99.1%). Thus it is apparent that the majority of graduates responding to this study perceived value to themselves as a result of their degree study.

This study identified (Chapter Two) the hegemonic discourse within Higher Education in recent decades and employed this to explore graduate attribution of value, a research approach not previously undertaken in this way. The framing of this element of the study reflected the neo-liberal approaches which have shaped the current marketisation and commercialisation of higher education giving precedence to individual goals and aims, values and evaluation above those of society. This has been articulated through government policy and in turn by higher education providers through marketing and promotion to prospective students, engagement with employers and curriculum development particularly surrounding employability. These emphasise and reinforce the economic/financial advantage of a degree defined in terms of graduate premium and employability. In the 2013 BIS research paper Walker and Zhu were explicit:

*"HE is an important and favourable investment for the government as well as for students."* (BIS 2013, 61)

Accordingly, the research sought to explore graduates' perceptions of individual value from the three elements identified from previous research into HE value, namely economic/financial; personal; and academic. In keeping with a constructivist, interpretivist paradigm, the meaning within each of those elements was constructed by the individuals responding in light of their own prior and subsequent experiences to previously defined parameters identified in literature. Graduates were free to agree, disagree, add or subtract areas of value presented to them.

Responses from graduates indicated broader value than that which has been the recent focus of HE political policy and emphasis. This was however not to say that all graduates considered their degrees as being without value or without economic/financial value. Instead it recognises that whilst there can be, and for many graduates there is, economic/financial value, it is not a necessity for overall value to be perceived. Graduates clearly indicated in both phases that they

considered the economic/financial element to be less valuable to themselves than academic (Phase 2) or personal (Phase 1). This has implications for the ways in which institutions and policy set expectations among prospective students which will be addressed within Chapter Seven.

In total only 16 graduates in Phase 2 (7.9%) and 1 graduate in Phase 1 (6%) allocated highest value to the economic/financial contrary to Mallier & Rodgers (1995) and Rodgers(2007) but in line with the warnings of both Gray (1999) and Milne(1999) who counselled of the dangers of presenting higher learning in too narrow a manner.

### **6.1 So what can dissonance between HE policy and graduate perceptions tell us?**

The SRM required graduates as individuals to reflect on the most important value developed by their degree. This is in line with the graduate premium and economic expectations of hegemonic discourse surrounding the undergraduate degree experience, particularly in light of tuition fees. Therefore it might be expected that those closest to their degree experience (up to a year away in this study), who would be in the early stages of their careers could potentially earn low initial starting salaries and accordingly they would allocate the lowest value to the economic/financial advantages. Equally it could be reasonably expected that those furthest away from their degree experience (up to 42 years from their degree in this study) might be those with the most developed careers, who would indicate that they perceived high or indeed the highest value to be situated in the economic/financial advantages of their degree. However in neither phase of the research was this shown to be the case. Whilst there was polarity in terms of distance from their degree experience there was consensus in terms of value allocation. Whatever the distance from their degree experience across the entire study graduates considered the economic/financial element to be of least importance.

The SRM did not ask graduates to detail whether they had achieved or not achieved economic/financial value and how they perceived that, that is through lower earnings or unrealised financial expectations. The purpose of the SRM was



instead to seek their individual evaluation within their lives of the importance of that value. It asked graduates to construct their own meaning around three core elements of value determined by previous research into the value of a degree. From the responses of graduates in Phase 1 it was apparent that lower allocation of economic/financial value stemmed from any combination of a series of factors, articulated in Chapter 5.A namely:

- a) expectations – realised, unfulfilled/unrealistic;
- b) lack of economic/financial value;
- c) perceived lack of career advancement value;
- d) personal philosophy;
- e) external influence;
- f) value balance;
- g) low cost/benefit analysis;
- h) demonstration of gained power through experience or cognitive dissonance.

I propose to examine these factors influencing perceptions of value in more detail, identifying where the findings from Phase 1 were supported or rejected by Phase 2 data, and illustrating where these are supported or rejected with typical quotations from respondents and connected to literature.

#### **a) Expectations:**

Alignment of expectations is recognised as important in framing decisions around satisfaction and also as shown in this study, value (Higgs et al, 2005).

(Realised expectations) The findings showed some graduates who placed economic/financial value lowest did so precisely because they had attained the financial value which they had expected from the outset and which may have been their original motivation for undertaking a degree (Lewis, 1989). This was evident in Phase 2 responses like:

*“It was my ticket to a much higher paid job but that’s what I did it for.”*

(Unrealistic/unfulfilled) It was also evident expectations of some graduates in terms of economic value of a degree were unfulfilled:

*“I could not get job yet. Bit sad now.”*

But there were more indications of perceptions of value being adversely affected by unrealistic expectations, either in the cost incurred to themselves of the

degree or in the earning capacity it would enable. This may be down to unrealistic marketing of courses, a lack of research or poor understanding on the part of the graduate when a student.

*"I thought I'd be much better off than I am."*

In some cases graduates were realistic but pragmatic about the outcomes of their degree not fulfilling expectations, either because of a failure they perceived in what they were taught or because their achievements had been insufficient

*"Because of my grades it hasn't landed me where I wanted."*

#### **b) Lack of economic/financial value:**

In their textual responses to the survey several graduates indicated their low allocation in this element was due to a lack of realisation of financial advantages as a result of their degree. This however was not always a negative. A9 (Chapter Five: Part A) saw his degree had led to a higher personal value for him through increase in choice, identity, opportunities and social standing although it had reduced his economic/financial status. Thus it can be seen that this graduate evidences value arising from the cultural capital of his degree (Tramonte & Wilms, 2010).

#### **c) Career advancement:**

One graduate indicated he could not have achieved advancement without the lodestone of his degree but others attributed either a lack of career advancement or attributed successful career advancement to factors other than their degree, such as on-the-job experience. However it is not possible to tell if their belief that they have not achieved career advancement is actually the result of their inability to achieve progression through other factors, or as the result of employers not recognising the validity of their degree in terms of the progression sought. Whilst there is significant university careers advice available for current students, and evidence of transferable skill impact (Assiter, 1995), additional research could be valuable within this area to evidence the employment of these skills and competencies across careers in different discipline, or indeed across changing disciplines as is becoming common (Poore, 2001).

**d) Personal philosophy:**

A broader philosophical approach of graduates to economic value was also evident as influencing responses. Social standing and personal satisfaction through contribution to society within graduate employment where a degree was required was illustrated during one interview (A9) illustrating that higher education can develop mobility that is simultaneously multidirectional. Within both phases graduates indicated this as a reason for the allocations they made about their perceptions of value. This aligns with Brink's evaluation when Chair of Universities UK that lateral mobility needs recognition, "*parity of esteem where status does not only equal earnings*" (Brink, Speech 2013). This is not only emphasising other elements over the economic/financial but rejecting the economic/financial emphasis from the outset.

**e) External influence:**

Some graduates clearly aligned their low allocation of economic/financial value to the influence on entry motivation of external factors such as career requirements or parental expectations (Archer et al, 2003; Brooks, 2004). Many of the media headlines reported in Chapter 3 appearing around the time of the survey questioned the hegemonic discourse, focusing on the economic exchange of a degree and questioning its value in those terms, comparing it unfavourably with other options for career advancement such as apprenticeships (Collins, 2013; Tierney, 2014). This may have had conscious or subconscious impact on graduates in their evaluation of the value they perceived in this area.

**f) Value balance:**

When comparing the financial advantages of their degree to other areas such as knowledge/skills or personal, it was evident that graduates considered the financial (when attained) to be lower than one or both of the others. As the following illustrations show, this reflected their evaluation that comparatively one area was of greater value than another, thus enabling I would argue a realistic picture of the complexity of the legacy they perceived within their experience.

*"My personal experience was amazing – the academic side was nothing like it."* (Phase 2)

*“The experience was valuable. The degree was of no value whatsoever. It may have got me into my first job, but no one ever saw it, no one has ever asked me for a certificate.” (A15)*

*“Increased autonomy and independence that led to increased self-awareness, esteem, confidence that led to better social and political awareness that led to eventual career pathway.”(Phase 2)*

#### **g) Cost/benefit analysis:**

Whilst graduates responded from different distances from their degrees it is possible that for some who had paid fees, or incurred debt in other ways during their degrees that responding whilst under the influence of the impact of loan repayment had adverse implications (to be explored further in Chapter Seven). There was also evidence from comments in Phase 2 that for some students the financial outlay and subsequent repayment influenced their perception of value, particularly in economic/financial allocation.

*My student loans are still being paid back and I am worse off than before I did my degree.(Phase 2)*

This indicates a need to improve pre-degree communication and realistic understanding of the reality of student loans in order to prevent miscommunication and false expectations damaging perceptions of value.

There was no explicit investigation or implicit reporting during interviews of the dangers that ‘easy loans’ lead to less incentives to succeed academically (Walker & Florea, 2014) or indeed that lower economic/financial values perceived were the results of poorer classifications achieved because of a lack of incentive (McKinney & Backscheider-Burridge, 2015).

#### **h) Demonstration of gained power through experience or cognitive dissonance:**

Cognitive dissonance appears relevant to this discussion as a theoretical perspective related to the experienced rather than the inferred (Festinger, 1962). Graduates, particularly those who consider they faced familial pressure to attend university are (as was apparent from Phase 1) aware of parental expectations

and values. Graduates indeed referred to parents' significant emphasis on the economic value of a degree.

*"I felt under big pressure - my parents wanted me to go to uni."*(A10)

These parents had not attended university and were seen by their son to be overtly influenced by media reports stressing graduate premium advantages. Other graduates talked of their parents and teachers making comparisons for them to others who had attended university and 'done well'. Graduates subjected to this type of expectation expressed frustration at the lack of control they felt they had in setting value parameters of their own.

Additionally interviewees in these cases identified parental expectations as being based on the cost-benefit connection between a degree and a highly paid, high status job. Individuals subjected to such comparisons may have experienced unconscious dissonance as a result. If they failed to discern apparent personal financial or economic value from their degree then they may have sought a method to reduce this dissonance, as this graduate indicated. Whilst their expected value was not achieved, another element was identified as having value, even though this evaluation appears to reduce a degree education to little more than some sort of finishing school:

*"Growing up as an independent and autonomous person was of value. The academic experience was an utter waste of my time."*

Some were obviously seeking to justify investing three or four years of their lives in higher education (and in some cases the associated costs) by reducing dissonance and seeking value in an area of their choosing. This was evident in interviews particularly, where interviewees often apologetically commented that they knew the academic was supposed to be the purpose of a degree but they felt from their experience that this had not been the most evident or any value to them. They then said they had experienced value in other elements. These were always personal such as "*friendships*", "*freedom*" and "*social life*."

*"It wasn't a complete a waste of time... I made friends that I've got for life"*

(Phase 2)

Others genuinely felt value in another area to that expected by prior conditioning from parents or teachers so were seeking to reduce the dissonance not of experience but of prior expectations.

Linder et al (1967) identified decision freedom as a condition for cognitive dissonance. For some graduates the desire to demonstrate their own experienced opinions against the recognised values of authority figures such as their parents or teachers may have led them to seek alternative values in their experience, either during the experience or when requested to articulate a choice. For some this was expressed in a self-realisation of finding benefit in mistakes.

*“Studying something I didn't want to do in a place I didn't want to be and getting on with it, finding joy in it and valuing the people around me. Mindful acceptance.”*

*“Realising I should have studied psychology.”*

Within the interviews it was clear that some students felt their individual experiences gave them credibility to speak from an informed perspective, and thus for them to correct what they saw as erroneous hegemonic discourse. This was seen in graduates who were both first generation into higher education and also those who were not. One was educating the previous generation's perceptions through experience, the other addressing what they saw as 'in my day' perceptions.

Consciously or subconsciously such wielding of 'expert' power may have resulted in the allocation of scores to rebalance the hegemonic discourse.

*“I don't really see having a degree as an advantage. From what I've seen it comes down to attitude and personality. You don't need a degree to get along in life, and you don't need a degree to be successful in life.” (A10)*

*“I remember my mother saying to me after I'd taken my last exam was I going to go on and do a PhD, and I was saying 'My god, I've failed' and she was saying 'No of course you haven't' but I fundamentally knew 100% that I had failed them, and I felt so terrible then, I almost wept, it was awful. But I know that the personal identity I got from my degree was much more important than the academic.”(A15)*

This desire to seek value somewhere may be compounded by the knowledge expressed within several of the interviews that attending university was seen as a sign of both direct and indirect acquisition of social status aligned to Bourdieu's notions of social capital (1980, 1986), and social mobility. Not only the individual attending university but the wider family, particularly parents of first in family students also benefited from the cachet of being associated with higher education.

This cachet of exclusivity is likely to change as more people acquire a degree through the policy of widening participation.

## **6.2 So what are the implications of economic/financial value achieving lowest rating?**

Given the political and policy emphasis on the economic value of a degree through the graduate premium and employability which underpinned the introduction of tuition fees (1998, 2004, 2011), the reported allocation in terms of perception has potential relevance for policy makers, institutions, prospective students and graduates in three main ways.

Firstly it indicates that graduates perceive broader value breadth than is currently being exploited, and understanding this breadth has relevance to prospective students. Secondly, if prospective students are directed to a cost/benefit model of higher education then these findings indicate they will be disillusioned. If future generations perceive the value potential for higher education not to be worth the outlay then the consequences of a move away from higher education has implications for society, governments, individuals, and institutions in terms of revenue, social mobility, economic prosperity and growth, and international capacity to compete. The third area of concern is a risk of devaluing the degrees and thus the value in them for existing graduates. If the purpose of undertaking an undergraduate degree is seen as being fundamentally to achieve economic benefit, then perception by those graduates who have achieved the degree but not perceived value in this area could have significant negative consequences.

Graduates in this study were 1- 42 years from their degree experience and therefore had been subjected to different economic situations. Some graduated into recessions and high unemployment, others into low unemployment. However 99.1% recognised value, emphasising either personal or academic value in their degree experience as well as to a lesser degree economic. Even when graduates achieved employment as was the case for 181 graduates in Phase 2, (75% of whom indicated 100% sustained employment since graduation), they still chose to allocate lower value to the economic/financial aspect of their degree. This is not a finding currently emphasised in the hegemonic discourse which influences HE policy.

Failure to recognise and articulate the full potential personal impact of a degree could have consequences for those already in HE (to anticipate dissatisfaction) and among prospective students it could encourage moves towards alternative post-compulsory education or alternatives not incurring significant financial outlay. Using the graduate voice to articulate the wider value within a degree has the capacity to inform individuals and society about wider benefits.

Maintaining the hegemonic emphasis of economic/financial value within a degree has the potential to result in a three-track higher education system that could have consequences for the widening participation agenda, and the role of employers within higher education. Figure 34 illustrates the impact of continuing with the cost/benefit emphasis, and how this could affect the student body.

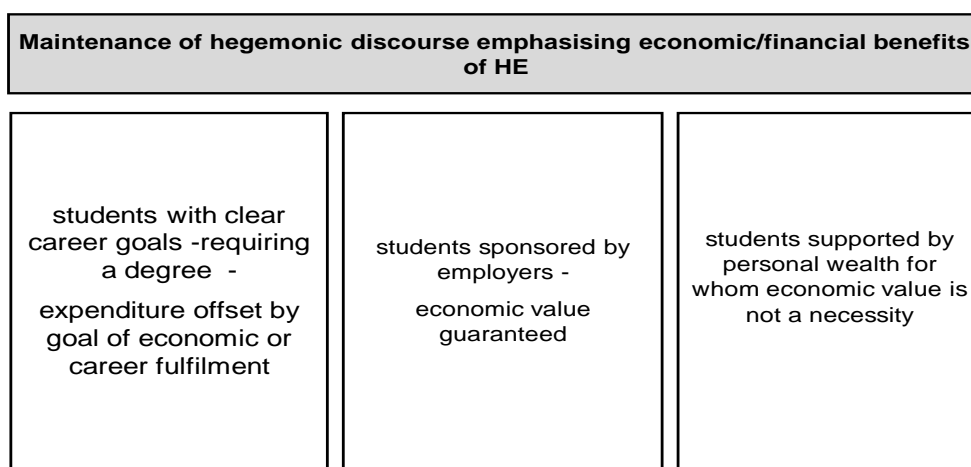


Fig. 34 Risks of maintaining hegemony of cost/benefit emphasis related to degree value



Maintaining the hegemonic emphasis of degree value related to economic/financial benefits has the potential as costs rise and the graduate premium falls, of narrowing the potential of higher education provision. As can be seen from Figure 34, those for whom a degree can be assured to bring economic/financial benefits would need higher education and recognise its value, namely those whose career demand a degree and those whose employers are sponsoring them. The third group attracted to higher education could be those students supported by personal wealth, and for whom economic/financial benefit within a degree is not a necessity.

Without clear demonstration of the value of a degree in broader terms than cost/benefit, prospective students could be dissuaded from considering undergraduate education in favour of other alternatives. Those most at risk would be those uncertain of career paths; first generation students without the benefit of prior knowledge of wider value, and indeed those clear that they want a degree but without private funding so concerned of the personal debt involved. In this study these graduates formed the largest group, which has implications for the continuation of higher education in its current expansive and diverse form.

This research indicates advantages in considering how Higher Education articulates and sets expectations, and evidences its impact on not only society, but given the individual benefit argument, on the individual legacy of a degree to the individual. Employment of the graduate voice and evidence to support claims of value, should lie at the heart of such an approach. This is not to say that reflection of the importance of a degree in employability terms should be abandoned, but that its scope should be more widely articulated. Yorke defined employability as

*“a set of achievements, understanding and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen careers, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.” (2004:8)*

This potential rather than guarantee has been aligned to the graduate attributes or graduate impact statements adopted by many HEIs. For those 90 institutions who have chosen to implement the Higher Education Achievement Report

(HEAR, 2014) to date these statements will form part of each student's report. This emphasises the economic/financial benefits of a degree to realise human capital in personal investment and through that the capacity to develop economic capital through increased individual potential.

### Themes of value and types of capital

Human capital theory in its most basic form has been used (Schultz, 1961) to weigh up the costs and benefits of doing a degree. In broader form it encompasses personal development, self-esteem, self-identity and self-worth which were reflected in the SRM personal aspect and VAS. This reflects the premise that the informed individual is able to weigh up the benefits or value and cost of their degree in this instance, and make a conscious decision to forgo short term gains for the more lucrative gains of the long term, whether economic or personal. This action of personal investment is intentional and goal oriented, and Bourdieu (1986) said, required each individual to have the ability and information to weigh up the options to achieve the best decision for themselves. Bourdieu clearly linked the attainment of human capital to the cultural capital within the individual's background which influenced the individual's values and thus judgments.

Economic capital, the financial benefits to the individual as a result of their degree, as well as the benefits in terms of securing their first job, advancement on the career ladder and financial independence, when related to higher education most directly matches to hegemonic discourse. This can be seen enacted in the political stance behind the Browne Report which led to the White Paper '*Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*' (2011), and to the improved value-added measurements (HEFCE KIS 2003). These sought to show students benefits in terms of graduate premiums and future advantages, and what different options would involve. Economic capital is now being employed in a different way – seeking value for students' money from HE in the 2015 BIS Green Paper '*Fulfilling our potential: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*.' Economic capital is being employed on a value for money basis.

Symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1980) embraces the individual's relationship with recognition encompassing here the perception and assumption of knowledge through the symbolic attainment of a degree. Thus the degree and its classification are symbolic capital to the individual and others significant to them. Bourdieu maintained that misrecognition arose from the misconceptions of the dominant classes believing their legitimate rights to benefit from the symbolic capital of the poor, but equally in today's society it is perfectly possible there may be a misconception on the part of the individual undertaking the degree of the value of symbolic capital which they will accrue. Symbolic capital is both dependent and variable depending on the type of institution, the final classification, the standing of the institution in multiple rankings, and also in the perception of its value by the individual who attains the degree.

A broader approach to articulating value and setting expectations would enable recognition of the personal perception of value or indeed in some cases transformation, which emerged strongly in the research. Whilst academic value and economic/financial value can be externally evaluated or qualified in some part by metrics or results, the personal is an intrinsic measure that lies in the control and ownership of the individual, and for that reason whilst difficult to evidence, it is also irrefutable. The complexity of evaluating it makes it no less valuable and indeed can be a powerful indicator of value as the comments from Phase 2 graduates indicated.

*"...changed my life.... Priceless!"*

*"It re-informed my personal beliefs about society, life and the value of life."*

*"The room to grow was invaluable."*

*"It changed my life in every way."*

### 6.3 So what are the key lessons from the findings?

1. Importance of recognising and setting expectations of value breadth
2. Impact of entry motivation
3. Behaviour during the degree
4. Graduate ambassadors

#### **1. Importance of recognising and setting expectations of value breadth**

The previous section of this chapter has addressed the importance of recognising and setting realistic and broad expectations of value within a degree.

#### **2. Impact of Entry motivation on graduates' perceptions of value**

Statistical significance was identified in the correlation of external pressures influencing entry motivation to undertake a degree with subsequent perceptions of value. The highest value was recorded by those motivated by personal aspirations combined with specific career goals. Lowest value was recorded by graduates who felt expected by others, often by familial pressures, to take a degree.

There are a series of possible explanations for these findings.

It can be recognised that those with specific career goals enter university with clear goals in mind that they wish to achieve within the experience. Thus they are self-determining in their approach to their studies (Deci, 1975; Deci et al, 1999). Graduates A2 and A3 particularly identified with this goal. This may too be one explanation for the fact that those graduates who reported changing institutions part way through their degree scored highly on the OVS – they had exercised self-determination during the process, often perhaps turning around expectations of others (Deci & Ryan, 2001).

Those motivated by personal aspiration alone rely on self-efficacy, which Bandura defined as an individual's beliefs in their own ability to attain their goals (1977). This can be seen to have relevance from the findings of Phase 1 among graduates who made their own choices and thus expressed determination to both make the experience work for them and to achieve value from it.

This too appeared to be the case for at least some of those who entered university from the clearing process if they considered that in the process they had a choice of institution and course. Their self-determination may also have been strengthened by not meeting the expectations of others which may also as A1 reported have resulted in a sense of control, of self-determination, and thus when heading into clearing, parental pressure was lessened to the extent that the choice of institution and course was left up to him with less external influence. For some the failure to meet expectations could equally have led to a sense of disappointment and demotivation and by exerting self-determination they were taking control of a potentially negative situation.

*“My mum was encouraging me to find an alternative because I didn’t get the grades. I think I redid my A levels out of guilt, I just cocked them up, I hadn’t done enough work. She was just glad when I found something, that I wasn’t going to laze around the house all day.” (A1)*

However the statistically significant impact on value perceptions came from those who were motivated by a combination of specific career goals and personal aspirations. This indicates potential to improve the perceptions of value among the wider student body with different entry motivations by developing a model of Perception of Value (POV) for Higher Education. This should explore ways to enhance the degree experience, and thus perceptions of value for all students.

The impact of motivation on behaviour and subsequent perception is a feature within most theories of motivation (Maslow, 1943; Vroom, 1964; Alderfer, 1967, 1969; McClelland et al, 1985). Vroom’s model ( $E+I+V=M$ ) (Figure 35) posits the theory that motivation (the amount by which a person will be motivated in a particular situation), is the function of three variables. Expectancy - the individual’s belief that they consider the effort relative to the requirement; Instrumentality – the individual’s belief that reward will follow for their efforts; and Valence – the individual’s anticipation of the reward for their effort. Valence has been variously described over the years, including ‘expected utility’ (Edwards, 1954), ‘attitude’ (Peak, 1955), ‘incentive’ (Atkinson, 1977), and ‘weighting bias’ (Pietri et al, 2013).

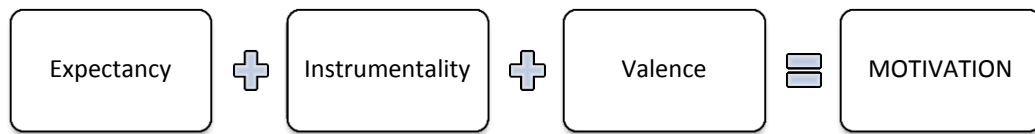


Fig. 35 Vroom (1964) Expectancy Theory of Motivation (illustrated by Ingham)

Vroom defined valence as the “anticipated satisfaction from an outcome”, clearly distinguishing between valence and value (1964, 14-15) which is important to reiterate for this particular study. Value to Vroom was “the actual satisfaction” provided by an outcome as opposed to the anticipation of outcome, the difference we might consider today between expectation and reality.

Whilst criticised by Deci et al. (1996) and others for emphasis on extrinsic motivation, Vroom’s model nonetheless offers an outline which has been applied in multiple environments from the business boardroom to the hospital ward, and which appears in light of the results of this study to be adaptable to higher education. Looking at the emerging data from this study it is possible to identify specific elements which influence perception of value to develop a model for higher education undergraduate degrees, and as can be seen from the italics this identifies the importance of entry motivation including intrinsic drivers and attitude during the experience, both additions to Vroom’s theory. This creates the first stage in a POV model (Figure 36).

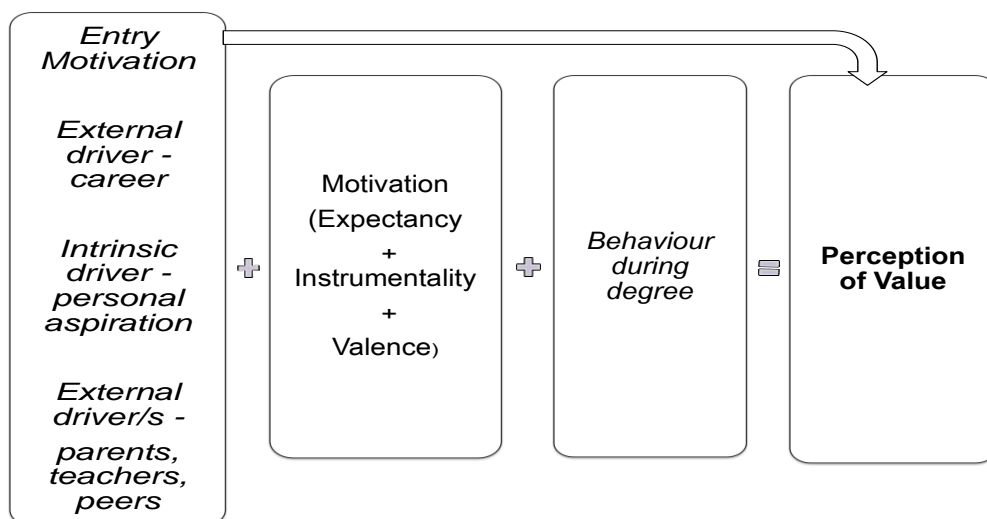


Fig. 36. Stage 1 in developing a conceptual model of Perceptions of Value in HE (Ingham).

The model utilises the findings of Phase 1 and Phase 2 combined with the exploration of Vroom's (1964) model of expectancy. Additionally it recognises the statistically significant connection evident in the research of the connection between entry motivation and perception of value. Expectancy and realisation of expectancy are identified as important factors in value perception. Belief that reward in whatever form the prospective student envisages be it a job, a career, a social life, friendships, post nominal letters, knowledge, or recognition from others will follow as a consequence of the effort expended (Instrumentality) is equally important in terms of entry motivation. Failure to realise instrumentality has the potential to diminish value perception. Finally within Vroom's theory comes a key element, Valence – the end-goal of anticipated satisfaction. Those who have worked with undergraduates will be familiar with motivational power of the anticipation of a graduate job, a graduation ceremony, and visible trappings of success, however each individual may envisage these. Therefore developing an undergraduate's own behaviour to recognise their role in achieving these is fundamental in developing a perception of value.

Behaviour during the degree can be seen to be an important area in achieving perception of value. Those with clear career goals (external) combined with personal aspiration (internal) (A2, A3 for example) evidenced active control of their behaviour to ensure the achievement of their aims, and thus secured the value they perceived. This was also evident from Phase 2 respondents with this combination of motivation.

### **3. Behaviour during the degree**

Determining the type of behaviour demonstrated during their degree by both those who did perceive high value and those who did not led to additional development of the model.

Those for whom others' expectation was the driving motivation (and in some cases where this had shaped their personal aspiration in terms of achieving goals for others) indicated that they had been more passive or less effective in their behaviour during their degrees, which was evidenced in them often having to retake elements and expressing relief when the degree was over (A8, A10, A6, A15). This aligns with self-efficacy: *"Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to*

*manage prospective situations.*” (Bandura, 1995:2). However the intrinsic motivation evident in self-determination or indeed in the Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings is not apparent in self-efficacy.

Self-determination theory (Deci et al, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 2001) could provide a solution as it clearly requires internal motivation. However it also needs autonomy in at least part, and considers that intrinsic motivation only occurs when autonomy exists over environments. This, whilst a goal for all students to achieve, does not exist in all HE learning environments so in order to evaluate a practical pragmatic Perception of Value theory for HE, self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004, 2009, 2014; Taylor et al, 2010) appears necessary during the degree to achieve a perception of value.

The concept of self-authorship results from Baxter Magolda’s 25 year longitudinal study of graduates in the United States. It appears increasingly important to individuals and employers (CBI/Pearson, 2014; BCC, 2014) to develop the autonomy expected of graduates if graduates are to be prepared for work. This autonomy is what Baxter Magolda defines as evolution “over time from uncritical reliance on external authority to internal criteria for guiding one’s life, or self-authorship.” (2014, conference presentation). Methods of development within higher education curricula seek to place the student in the driving seat of their learning with the educator as a supporting facilitator . (Mazur,1997, 2009; Mezirow,2000).

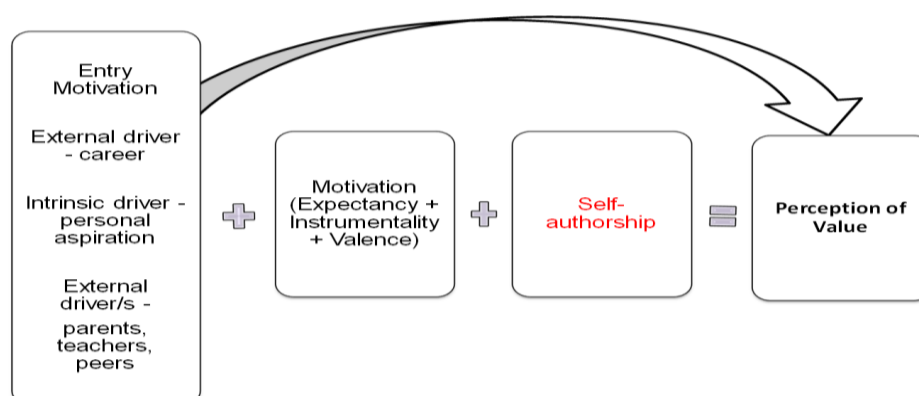


Fig. 37. Stage 2 in developing a conceptual model of Perceptions of Value in HE (Ingham).



As Phase 2 indicated the entry orientation and motivation which generates self-authorship behaviour demonstrated statistical significance in achieving high and lasting value perceptions (Figure 37). This supported Phase 1 findings with interviewees demonstrating this pattern (A2, A3 and A9).

Thus I suggest the findings of this research study indicate a Perception of Value in HE theory thus:  $EM + M(E+I+V) + SA = PoV$ . Each stage is influenced by the graduate voice (Figure 37). The graduate voice evidences Expectancy, Instrumentality and Valence whilst also informing curriculum development to increase self-authorship through student engagement. It additionally influences both entry orientation enabling effective and realistic entry expectations, and these in turn generate improved perceptions of value which influence further institutional advancement.

This is particularly valuable in bringing the dimension of hindsight to inform present experience. As Tulving recognised:

*“Judgments about what is good and what is bad, what is worthwhile and what is a waste of talent, what is useful and what is less so, are judgments that seldom can be made in the present.” (1991:42).*

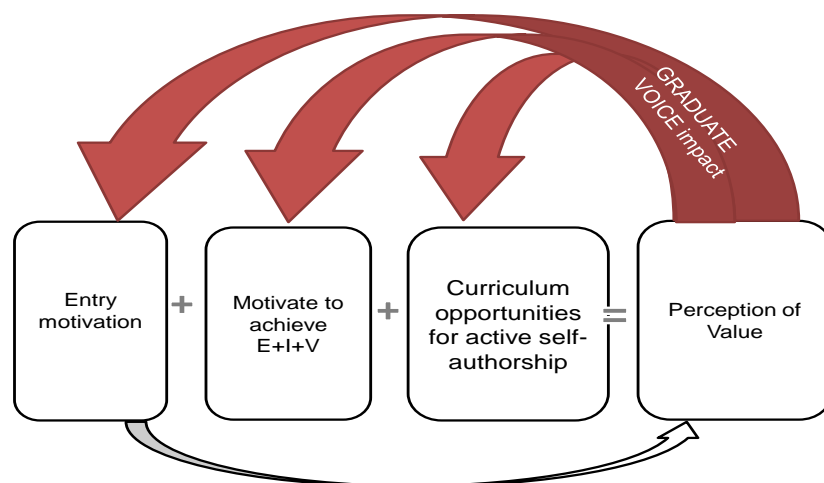


Fig. 38 Conceptual model of Graduate Voice in Perception of Value of Higher Education (Ingham) [Stage 3]

In this way those factors identified as positively influencing motivation are recognised together with the fulfilling behaviour of self-authorship which supports realisation of a positive perception of value. If any element is missing, motivation, expectancy instrumentality, valence or self-determined behaviour then perception of value will be reduced. Thus it can be seen that entry motivation informed by the evidence of the graduate voice, combined with self-authorship during the degree journey (again supported by the graduate voice) has the potential to positively enhance perceptions of value of the degree experience (Figure 38). This model will be supported by further testing.

#### **6.4 So what can be learned from disaffected graduates?**

It might have been expected that the seven graduates without work would have a low perception of value as a result. However as reported on, this was the case for only one graduate. The others indicated value in different ways, perhaps as a demonstration of cognitive dissonance or because their initial expectations of the degree experience had been broader than employment alone.

There is relevance for the higher education sector in seeking ways to reduce dissatisfaction and raise perceptions of value, particularly in light of the political aim to encourage more graduates to move through the system. The message of the few disaffected graduates was to ensure prospective students are fully aware of the potential outcomes of an undergraduate degree beyond employment seems a pragmatic one. The importance of awareness and full information particularly about course options and content appeared in several elements in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 from those recording low or negative perceptions of academic value.

A lack of clear communication and/or understanding was apparent among graduates indicating how their classification matched expectations (Figure 39). Whilst statistically insignificant, in terms of a relationship between perceptions of value and expectations of classification, the data when explored by mission groups indicated that some students were unsure of what they were expected as a classification. Phase 1 findings give this context as two interviewees highlighted that their lack of information had led them to miss out on a higher classification by just a few points. Their frustration at not having this knowledge available when

they could have responded to it to enhance their performance was apparent although it did not appear to have influenced their value perceptions.

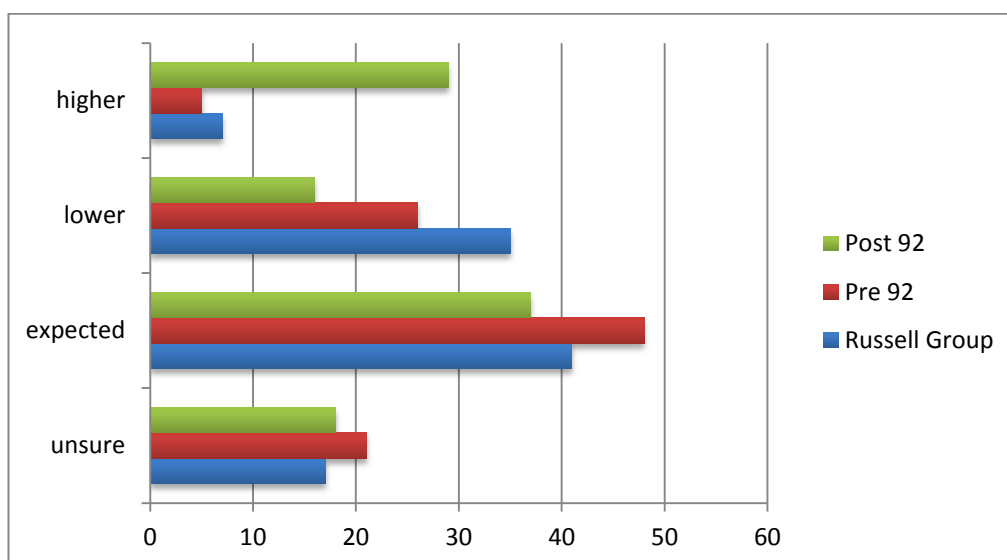


Fig. 39 Proportional percentage of classification expectations by group

Additionally this may indicate that some mission groups articulate more clearly than others the goals to be achieved .Alternatively, and in light of the debate around grade inflation those achieving higher than expected classifications might be thought to have been the recipients of grade inflation or alternatively individuals who set more modest than realistic targets for themselves.

## 6.5 So what is degree value if not employability or economic/financial advantage?

Value in some form was perceived by 99.1% of responding graduates. Graduates most strongly identified academic and personal value (Table 17).

The Overall Value Score indicated highest value allocated to written communication and developing a knowledge of own capabilities. The weakest areas of value were team/group working skills and political awareness.

The Academic Value Indicator indicated subject knowledge as having most value as might be expected with team/group working skills and leadership skills the areas of least value. This indicates opportunities to improve the ways in which

team/group working skills and leadership skills are taught within the curriculum. The results in this area were unchanged across the four decades of graduate experience within the study. Involving alumni and particularly alumni employers in the teaching and development of these core skills within their disciplines would appear a key way to support students, academics, employers and ultimately the economy.

## 6.6 Limitations

The research sought data on the educational background, and educational family background of participants as a feature of both phases. Seeking social background was not a specific part of this study and might have identified additional depth to perceptions of value. However it is possible that some evaluation of social reproduction on value perceptions could be obtained in future examination of the existing data in exploring correlations between first in family HE students and funding combined with motivation.

Whilst the survey sought significant detail from respondents and this was helpful in order to identify whether key areas emerging from Phase 1 were relevant in a larger population, in retrospect it could have been helpful to focus more deeply on specific areas within the survey, despite the impact this would have had in narrowing the available material. Data was gathered (of international students for example) which has not formed part of this thesis. This however will be the subject of further study, and a narrowed focused approach to the survey could have not secured this data although it might have given space for an additional question on background, class or further study. Indeed whilst interviewees made clear distinction between their recollections of their first degree and any subsequent studying, focusing on this as a separate strand within the second phase might have enabled connections between second degrees and perceptions of value.

Finally it is necessary to remember that the respondents in both phases were self-selecting; the interviewees came forward from a variety of sources but their agreement was necessary before interview, and the survey respondents were all online users. Thus the study may be reflecting more positivity than is experienced

across the graduate population generally. However if this is the case then it would appear to make a more comprehensive study into collation and publication of the graduate voice more necessary and valuable for the sector.

## Summary

- This chapter evaluated the key findings arising from the research with graduates:
- It considered the low allocation of value by graduates in terms of economic/financial advantage in terms of implications for prospective students, graduates, institutions, the HE sector, and political policy.
- It chartered the development of and advanced a model of Perception of Value in HE as a way of explaining and enhancing perception of value.

## Chapter Seven: Graduate voice – the Missing Link of the HE community

This concluding chapter returns to the concept of the graduate voice, and employs the final stage of this particular cycle of reflection to ask Now What? (Rolfe et al., 2001). Based on the research I consider the impact for higher education of utilising the perception of value lens informed by the voices of those who have completed degrees. I explore how this research and expansion of the principles behind it can inform policy, the sector, individual institutions within it, alumni and students both current and prospective. The chapter considers further research opportunities and concludes with reflection, a crucial element of professional practice in terms of my own development through the thesis process.

### 7.0 Key findings for policy and practice

Literature surrounding the value of a degree indicated that the current hegemonic discourse has the potential to at best mask and at worst fail to recognise the breadth of value of a first higher education degree as identified by those with first-hand knowledge and experience.

Graduates perceived the lowest value within the economic/financial element of their degree. This comes when costs to students are at their highest and at a time when the Minister of State for Universities and Science admitted:

*“Recent indications that the graduate earnings gap is in decline, and that significant numbers of graduates are going into non-graduate jobs, reinforce the need for action.”* (Johnson, 2015:8).

However the hegemonic discourse influencing policies and legislation surrounding higher education since the Dearing Report (1997) continues to emphasise economic/financial benefit. What was striking in the responses from graduates one to 42 years from their experience was how the economic/financial was the single area where they indicated lowest perception of value within their degrees. Therefore it might be concluded given the apparent imbalance between hegemonic perceptions and those of the individual graduates that there is no

value within a degree. This notion has been reinforced by the media for the past decade querying value in cost/benefit terms. However within the research which underpins this thesis 99.1 per cent of responding graduates perceived individual value in their degree.

Therefore the hegemonic discourse is clearly out of step with graduate perceptions of value and to fail to hear these at a time of diminishing graduate returns would appear short sighted if not blinkered. From Phase 1 it was apparent that achievement of expected economic/financial value (Lewis, 1989) had an impact on allocation of value. However for the majority, their value allocation stemmed from their belief that the value had been higher in personal and/or academic terms.

From these findings it is possible to conclude that the HE sector has the capacity to be strengthened through graduate insight into the scope and breadth of value in degree study. Johnson in his foreword to the Teaching Excellence Framework Green Paper advised: “*Higher education should deliver lasting value to graduates...*” (BIS, 2015:8). I contend that this research demonstrates precisely that through evidence from graduates of the lasting and in some cases still developing value they perceive from their undergraduate degrees. This research showed graduates consider the value of a degree is significant and something they would recommend to future generations, but its value lies in areas not neatly quantifiable by cost-benefit analysis.

Recognition of the lasting impact of degree value in personal and academic terms is evident in Baxter Magolda’s (2009) theory of self-authorship arising from an 18-year longitudinal study encompassing students as graduates. Brooks and Everett (2009) too drew on graduate perceptions to evaluate the impact of degrees on formal lifelong learning. This work indicates value to the HE sector in combining the approaches of both these previous studies to build the importance of regularly researching and publishing the graduate voice in relation to the entire degree experience, and increasing self-authorship within the curriculum to support value development.

The different lenses and tools (Chapter 4) which have been used to consider the elements of individual value within a degree and the transformational impact of higher education have been considered (Chapters 1 & 2). These have enabled a broader scope in considering value in a way more accessible and applicable than that of Schwartz (1992). It is recognised from the findings of the study that some elements of the personal value of an experience may be evident during the experience itself, such as increased self-confidence, self-belief and self-worth. Other elements may not be fully realised for some considerable time, often not until individuals are employed in another context as was apparent in graduate comments (Chapter 5). Thus regular evaluation of perceived value of a degree at a distance from the experience further than the current 6-month DLHE survey, or limited longitudinal survey of employed graduates 42-months post-graduation, has potential to enhance awareness of the legacy of the sector, and what it offers to both prospective and current students.

Graduate evidence of the long-term benefits (or shortcomings) can enhance curricula development and delivery (Chapters 3 & 6). One question this raises is what timescale and duration of post-graduation assessment would best inform learning and teaching to maintain currency and relevance.

The graduate voice is an informed contributor in the debate about the value of HE, about how and what is taught and indeed the purpose of research, teaching and enterprise for all in the learning community of HE. It has the capacity to move the consideration of the value of a degree from a purely cost-benefit analysis which it has understandably become in light of the reducing graduate premium, and the increasing numbers of graduates. Whilst it includes evaluation of the economic/financial debate it underlines the powerful impact of the individual growth in independence, identity, knowledge, skills and competencies developed within a higher academic environment.

The significant academic value developed through engagement with research, critical-thinking and intensive, informed study is the lodestone which sets higher education apart from other post-compulsory opportunities. Enabling every graduate to receive and be aware of the academic value to them and have the opportunity to reflect upon how that informs their future as they progress through



their careers appears not just important but a fundamental part of learning (Dewey, 1933). Enabling this reflection to enlighten institutions, generations of students who aspire to follow in their footsteps and the academics developing future programmes of study is essential. Much of this feedback is positive but rarely passed on, and in this way academics like the one in the Preface, can fail to recognise the impact or value of their teaching to individuals, corporate life and society.

Just as graduates have a role to play within society, they have an important and continuing role to play in the learning community of higher education. Actively seeking, hearing and including the graduate voice within courses, curriculum and evaluation of our work has the potential to inform communities of practice within institutions and the sector as a whole to enable enhancement and mutual recognition of value.

The graduate voice is, I believe, one of which McArthur was thinking:

*“Higher education should enable students to develop and celebrate their own identities. ... The sounds of higher education should therefore be a cacophony of different voices. There should be shouting. Higher education should challenge, provoke and inspire. It should look messy. It should not fit neatly within the lines of an accountant's ledger. It should look rather like the world in which it exists and which it partly serves.” (2011:746)*

From this research it is evident the graduate voice can evidence the outcomes and value of higher education. For organisations to survive and thrive in unpredictable environments, complexity theory (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998) identifies that they must change and reinvent themselves continually, through improvisation, adaptation, regeneration, and experimentation. Engaging with the graduate voice is one way of enabling evidenced change. It is not reinventing but recognising a legacy, a heritage of value evidenced in this research and which is at the heart of the following recommendations .

## 7.1 Recommendations

- 1) Regularly gather and publish graduate perceptions of value breadth to evidence employability, transferability and legacy. (sector/institutions)
- 2) Enhance self-authorship, reflection and graduate engagement within academic programmes.(institutions/academics)
- 3) Encourage active Communities of Practice based within disciplinary areas with graduates at their heart.(institutions/academics)

### **1. Regularly gather and publish graduate perceptions of value breadth to evidence employability, transferability and legacy.**

The research indicates that identifying and employing the perceptions of graduates has value in enabling an evidence-based charting of legacy and value provided by both the sector and individual institutions.

In order to demonstrate the lasting value of a degree researching value perceptions at distances from their experience has relevance and significance for the future of HE to inform political policy, institutional policy, current and prospective student. To inform prospective students the graduate voice would demonstrate trajectories and value perceptions of graduates from every programme of study at say 2, 5, 10 and 15 years from graduation.

In light of graduates' low allocation of economic/financial value, recommending ways to represent graduate value systematically and consistently accrued in personal and academic terms is important to inform perceptions of the value individuals can accrue through a degree. Graduates' voices are important in the HE value debate as individuals with first-hand experience and they are all potential ambassadors for higher education. Whilst their views current about academic, personal and economic/financial value may be apparent to those individuals with whom they speak, they are currently not heard within or articulated by higher education as a whole

The SWOT analysis (Table 18) I believe summarises and supports the case for collection, evaluation and articulation of the graduate voice to develop a relevant

dimension to inform policy makers, institutions, prospective and current students and to develop more meaningful relationships with graduate alumni.

Table 18. SWOT analysis on graduate voice in terms of value evaluation.

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <p>Provides more information for students, parents and other stakeholders about the value of a degree</p> <p>Increases focus of the breadth of value in a degree</p> <p>Supports academic morale and recognition of the value of their work with students</p> <p>Provides means for institutions and courses to demonstrate impact in terms of influence and development through their alumni</p> <p>Continues relationships and expectations of community contributions developed during degree years</p>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <p>Cynicism and fear of manipulation by powerful institutions if this was to be a national ranking consideration</p> <p>Likelihood of highly nuanced responses if a metric is used and a need for quantitative processes to be adjusted</p> <p>Requires consideration of what is being measured – value, perception of value, value-added, opportunity to develop value?</p>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <p>Moves analysis beyond engagement in academia (NSS, student voice) to recognise the value of the application of academia</p> <p>Enhance existing data from NSS, Module evaluations</p> <p>Supports individual institutional identities through their distinctive graduate voice</p> <p>Informs programme/ module development through stronger engagement with alumni as employees and employers</p> <p>Evidences institutional graduate attributes</p> <p>Develops stronger relationships and expectations of the mutual support of alumni and institutions</p> <p>Potential to develop fundraising</p> <p>Enables evaluation of the durability of degrees</p> <p>Develops recognition that social mobility can be linear rather than hierarchical which may support reduced graduate premiums</p> <p>Capacity to evidence Motivation (E, I &amp; V) for prospective and current students</p>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <p>Wrong metrics or approach could make it too complicated to administer, complete and analyse</p> <p>Metrics are always subjective and can be easily manipulated by those in control</p> <p>Using metrics not accepted, readily understood, or seen as fair or relevant will undermine results</p> <p>Difficulty in engaging graduates with their alma mater (although this may be offset by increasing expectations during the degree through visibility and relevance of graduate perceptions and increasing technological contacts)</p> <p>Resistance from policy makers where findings conflict with HE policy</p>

Regular access to and involvement with graduate perceptions of value has the capacity to further inform the Learning Gain evaluation already under way within UK Higher Education (Hoareau McGrath et al, 2015). This they define as:

*“...the ‘distance travelled’, or the difference between the skills, competencies, content knowledge and personal development demonstrated by students at two points in time. This allows for a comparison of academic abilities and how participation in higher education has contributed to such intellectual development.”* (Hoareau McGrath et al, 2015:xi).

Learning gain is becoming an area of increasing focus as an enabler of evaluation of value-added to individuals by engagement with higher education learning. As will be remembered from Figure 38, there are opportunities for the graduate voice to evidence and enhance learning gain development within the curriculum.

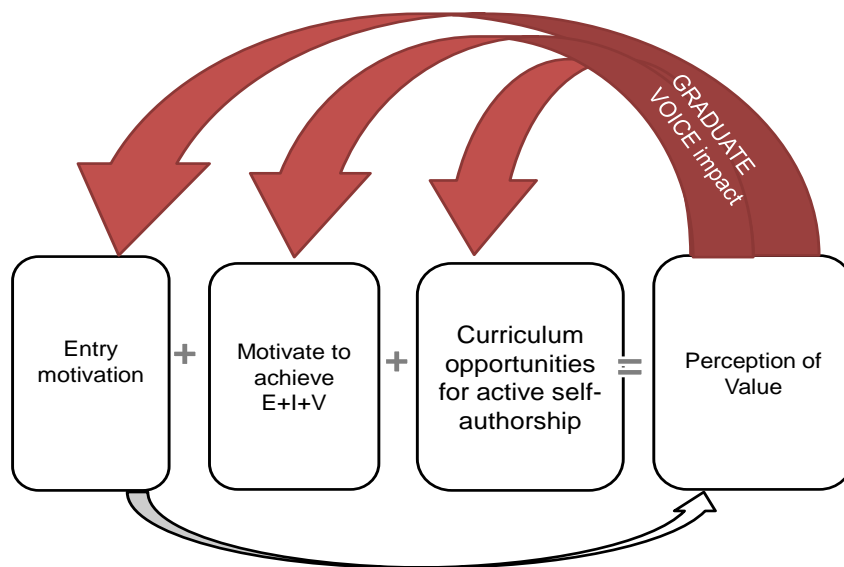


Fig. 38 Conceptual model of Graduate Voice in the Perception of Value of Higher Education (Ingham)

This model has particular relevance as the vehicle to enhance perceptions of value pre-degree but within the degree it focuses within the learning experience,

the required part of every student's degree journey unlike volunteering or sport which are important options but not accessed by all.

Statistically it was significant that those graduates who perceived the highest value to themselves from their degree were those motivated on entry by a combination of personal aspiration and specific career goals requiring a degree. This group in Phase 2 amounted to 5% (n=10) of the respondents and represented graduates from all institutional mission groups. It was evident that nine of these graduates actively developed self-authorship techniques during their experience as students which supported them to achieve high levels of value as these quotations illustrate:

*"Personal and professional networks that I set up both with my classmates and the staff of the University. "*

*"Developing ownership concepts."*

*"I achieved a First which was a great reward for the hard work I put in."*

*"It was a mixture of finding the real me and enjoying the present, while keeping a firm hand and eye on the requirements for the future."*

This indicates an opportunity to enhance perceptions of value for the remaining 95 per cent of students who did not benefit from the entry motivation and focus that would enable them to independently achieve high perceptions of value.

## **2. Enhance self-authorship and graduate engagement within academic programmes/courses**

Self-authorship to support individual approaches of enhancing initial self-determination and developing clear pathways towards goals is seen as important (Baxter Magolda, 2009). It offers potential in terms of the explicit articulation of approaches to working with individuals, and aligns to curriculum development of meaningful higher education. As a result of this research it is evident that HE needs not only student engagement, but graduate engagement.

Graduate engagement is an extension of student engagement defined by the network for Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE) as

*“...about what a student brings to Higher Education in terms of goals, aspirations, values and beliefs and how these are shaped and mediated by their experience whilst a student. SE is constructed and reconstructed through the lenses of the perceptions and identities held by students and the meaning and sense a student makes of their experiences and interactions. As players in and shapers of the educational context, educators need to foster educationally purposeful SE to support and enable students to learn in constructive and powerful ways and realise their potential in education and society.” (RAISE, 2010).*

Actively engaging students and graduates in developing the academic challenge within their studies and actively designing their futures as individuals and learners supports Festinger’s recognition that individuals place higher value on those things which demand greater effort of them:

*“This suggests that organisms may come to like and value things for which they have worked very hard or for which they have suffered.” (1962:3)*

Enabling development of self-authorship when a student has control can also develop ‘visible learning’ and enhanced outcomes:

*“When students become their own teachers they exhibit the self-regulatory attributes that seem most desirable for learners (self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-assessment, self-teaching.” (Hattie 2009: 271)*

Self-authored engagement can reduce, and future research may show it can reverse, the impact of dissonance introduced into their degree experience by a lack of self-determination in entry motivation. This was evident in initial evaluation indicating Phase 1 students saw more value in activities which challenged them, although they identified all as being extra-curricular (Ingham, 2014; Yorke, 2014). This endangers the inclusivity of such value opportunities for part-time students, carers and those who need to work to earn.

Creating greater challenge and development within the curriculum has the capacity to reinforce connections to and with students’ academic discipline which sits at the heart of their journey through their degree. Drawing on the research, making the academic journey the focal point for individual development has the

potential to create enhanced perceptions of value during and at distance from the degree. Incorporating authentic self-authorship and reflective skills opportunities into the academic journey enables students to recognise and plan for achievement. This underlines the skills and knowledge begun at university and has the capacity to ameliorate the risks of consumerist employability-ready approach to higher education which could make HE susceptible to the vagaries of the market place. Developing challenged and challenging individuals who are resilient, creative and capable of self-authoring their success would support clear expectations of a degree above and beyond employability alone.

Graduate perceptions of value evident in Chapter 5 influence probability to recommend a degree, an institution and a course to future generations of prospective students. The individual perceptions behind those recommendations are shaped by individual experiences, personalities and goals but recognising the 'long view' of the value of that experience is essential. Relationships in which institutions invest during degree study can be wasted if not maintained.

Whilst it is not always possible to influence entry motivation, the sector and institutions within it have the capacity and duty to inform potential and current students about the value open to them. Enabling students to take more responsibility for the outcomes of their studies through self-authorship opportunities enables increased engagement.

Managing student expectations has become increasingly important for HE since the 2006 introduction of top-up fees. Since then the perception of students as customers has led to

*“unrealistic expectations by some students through their equating the ‘right to education’ with ‘the right to demand a good degree with good grades’”*  
(Kaye et al, 2006:98).

Many student complaints stem from unrealistic expectations (Buckton 2008; Burke 2004; Radcliffe & Lester, 2003). Longden (2006) identified complaints stemmed from a 'mismatch' between students' perceived expectations and the reality they face. The impact of unrealistic expectations can lead to a disillusionment and dissatisfaction (Chapter 5, Jones, 2006). This creates

challenge, to manage expectations without compromising the purpose and goals of higher education.

Reducing the personal and institutional impacts of student drop-outs are a goal for much of the sector, and a not unsubstantial cost to individuals and society:

*"There is, however, a considerable minority (20-30%) who consistently experience academic and personal problems and for whom coming to university has been a negative experience. These students are at risk, if not from drop-out, then from under-performance and lack of fulfillment."* (Lowe & Cook, 2003, abstract).

As the consumer approach becomes more apparent within students' attitudes to higher education (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013) and the government demands accountability for student fees (BIS Green Paper, 2015) expectations rise as seen in earlier theoretical and empirical work on decision-making (Weiner 1992; Eccles et al, 1998). Articulating individual graduate narratives (alumni case studies, Browne, 2011) currently exists but placing these in a context of a general survey of graduates adds illumination to the informed decision making of prospective students about whether they might benefit from taking a degree or not. Achieving regular evidence of trajectories, destinations and perceptions of value at greater distances gives context to graduate journeys post-university. This is particularly relevant for prospective students now faced with further, higher and apprenticeship education competing for their attention in the arena of post-compulsory opportunities today.

The value of predecessors' experience and outcomes in terms of perception of value can have great importance for setting realistic expectations. These expectations are the benchmarks, the criteria against which experiences will often be weighed and thus ensuring realistic expectations supports greater realisation of success. Eccles (2005) said:

*"... we proposed that educational, vocational, and other achievement-related choices are most directly related to two sets of beliefs: the individual's expectations for success and the importance or value the individual attaches to the various options perceived by the individual as available."* (2005:105)



Setting realistic expectations informed by those with independent experience is particularly important within first generation higher education students, for whom reliable benchmarking is not always available within the immediate family circle. Given that UK institutions are now, as outlined in Chapter 2, explicitly marketed by their NSS results it is important to actively support students to set realistic and recognised goals prior to arrival, as well as working to improve perceptions during their courses. Setting these with informed and realistic feedback from previous generations whose experience provides a 'long view' context in which to place expectations supports individuals and institutions alike. Thus employing the graduate voice would support institutions, students and the sector on both moral and economic grounds.

The emphasis graduates individually place on expectations of their degree and the associated expectations of stakeholders (family, employers and peers) has implications for HE institutions and politicians. A narrow application of the value of a degree, benchmarking its value by what may be considered a graduate post must be of concern to educators and politicians (Johnson, 2015). Seeing economic/financial drivers as the sole or main goal of a degree can result in the wider personal and academic experience being devalued if the degree is seen as only having value when it results in a graduate job, which is not the outcome for all. This emerges from research raising issues of value if students no longer saw their degree giving them advancement in the increasingly competitive and credentialised job market (Collins, 1979; Brooks & Everett, 2009). This could however be a natural cycle of credentialisation replicating social and power structures by moving the goal posts by which graduate jobs are defined. This raises expectations that an undergraduate degree is insufficient requiring augmentation through work experience, volunteering, or a Master's degree. Often these incur additional cost putting them out of reach for poorer individuals thus defeating attempts at widening participation.

*"Whenever the attempts of the initially most disadvantaged groups to come into possession of the assets previously possessed by groups immediately above them in the social hierarchy or immediately ahead of them in the race are more or less counterbalanced, at all levels, by the efforts of better-placed groups to maintain the scarcity and distinctiveness of their assets."*  
(Bourdieu, 1979 [1984]:157).

As the sector develops, and political policy moves towards increasing the numbers engaging with HE, the graduate voice with its credibility of experience has particular relevance for widening participation students, their families and/or connected stakeholders seeking to understand degree value. Recognising the wider values of a degree is something which may be outlined by graduate parents and siblings. For those without this personal background knowledge to draw upon the experiences of others and evaluation of the overall perceptions of value of students from similar and different backgrounds further informs choice.

### **3. Encourage active Communities of Practice based within disciplinary areas with graduates at their heart**

In light of motivation and perceptions of academic value findings, developing stronger communities of practice centred around HE academic practice would appear to support development of self-authorship grounded in disciplinary areas.

Dewey opined:

*“...the measure of the value of an experience lies in the perception of relationships or communities to which it leads up. It includes cognition in the degree in which it is cumulative or amounts to something, or has meaning.” ([1915] 2004:152).*

There are significant advantages in developing opportunities for graduates to maintain and develop intensive relationships with their alma mater. These relationships support the individuals concerned, institutions and the sector regarding perceptions as Fig. 5 indicated.

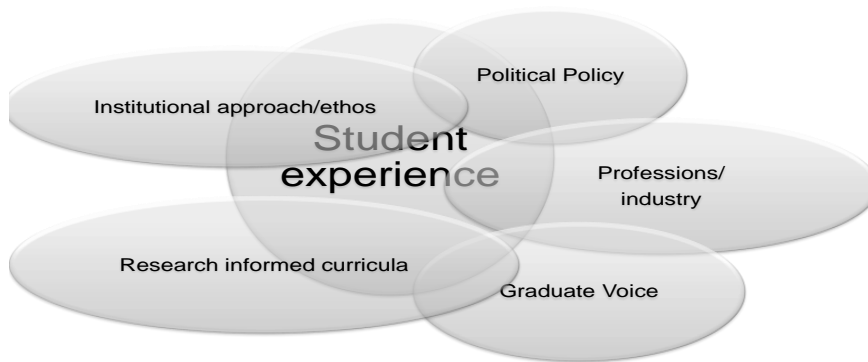


Fig. 5 Venn diagram of impacts of student experience

However in light of the findings (Chapter 5) it appears that locating the graduate voice as a tangential element in higher education is erroneous. Its most effective location for impact is to be central (Figure 40).

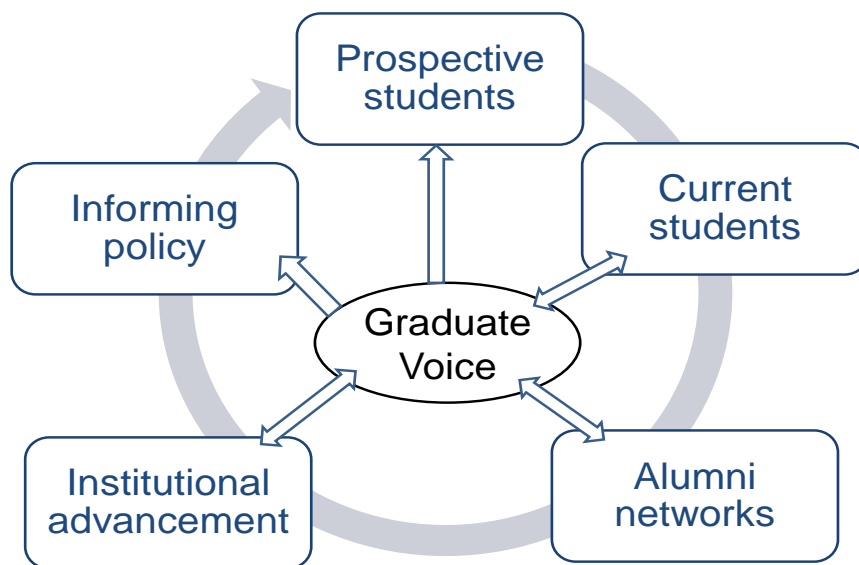


Fig. 40 Repositioning the graduate voice at the centre of the HE academic communities. (Ingham)

The graduate voice has the potential to inform each area in different but relevant ways:

- i. **Prospective students** - continuous, developing evidence of lifelong impact and transferability of a degree, particularly relevant to prospective students without access to previous knowledge of HE.
- ii. **Current students** - supporting developing of self-authorship through opportunities, attitudes, skills and knowledge to maximise degree impact during the experience. Enables the start of building career-focused networks.
- iii. **Institutional Advancement** - potential to develop more meaningful engagement and relationship with employers, alumni, communities and outreach opportunities
- iv. **Alumni networks** – ongoing community of practice reinforcing and renewing value accrued
- v. **Informing Policy** – providing informed evidence of the breadth and scope of degree legacy for policy makers in HEIs and Governments.

This positioning builds on the establishment and benefits of a strong graduate voice as indicated on p129. It values graduates for their roles as informed participants, employers, parents, ambassadors and evaluators. Some graduates already return or continue to be active within HE as students on Masters or Doctoral programmes, but others may have no contact with their institution from the day they graduate. This is not to say that they see no value in their degree, perhaps it is just that they have never been asked to contribute their perspective as articulated in Phase 1. The graduate voice actively seeks their opinions and asks them to articulate not only what university did for them and how their perception of that has changed over the years, but what they can do for their university too (Gallo, 2012 ) in this lasting relationship with new expectations (2015 Green Paper).

Working with postgraduate researchers (PGRs) on a project at Loughborough University enabling them to develop communities of practice and building self-authorship opportunities among undergraduates has been an experience that has identified considerable value for all concerned. The project has been interesting in the ways PGRs from around the UK have articulated value in their learning experiences within HE and shared their particular insights. The project has developed stronger, more intensive relationships around disciplines, through dual mentoring to develop self-authorship. This project has demonstrated one

aspect of the potential of graduate engagement. (Collins et al, ISSOTL 2015; Collins & Ingham, 2015).

## 7.2 Now what?

What can be done with the knowledge developed in this thesis to support higher education and those involved within it?

The work is built around accessing and understanding the range of graduate perspectives. As a result of the research, I contend that seeking and employing the graduate voice particularly in perceptions of value at regular distances from a degree can inform both institutional and sectoral understanding of what students, value, seek and consider important within the context of their motivations and individual institutions. Temple et al (2014) identified that what institutional managers and staff thought was important was not always shared by students or graduates. This has implications for funding projects and initiatives, and may indeed indicate a need for educational emphases.

The same report identified the capacity for global alumni networks to enhance student recruitment rates as well as contributing to international placements and work experience opportunities. Engaging regularly to maintain relationships with international graduates will support such goals.

Actively seeking the graduate voice on a regular basis could have impact on relationship building and thus institutional advancement. Three graduates during Phase 1 specifically referred to this as a missed opportunity:

*“I only ever hear from (name of) University when they want money – they don’t ask me to get involved in anything, talking to students, sharing experiences or being part of the university any more – they just want money.” (A14)*

*“I’d love to have some involvement with (name of university) – I’m really grateful for what my degree has done for me, and I would like to be able to share that with future generations.” (A5)*

*“They’ve never asked me back, never asked me anything, I think they just got my money and that was that.” (A6)*

Education is a risky business in terms of high stakes investment both personal and financial, in expectations and outcomes. Outcomes of study cannot be guaranteed, however enabling self-authorship in terms of providing student control and choice within their learning experience and equipping students as informed members of a professional community of practice appears to have the capacity to affect the extent to which individuals consider outcomes are likely (expectancies) or probable and are then directing their route to achieve these. Opportunities for self-authorship appear within increasing student engagement with an individual’s studies through informed choice in modules, assessments, pathways through degree programmes, placements (Hill et al, 2005), and regular prompted reflection to evaluate the learning journey travelled, as well as through offering opportunities to maintain and develop this self-authorship of degree value post-graduation.

In the competitive world of marketing testimonials, endorsements or recommendations from clients are a key part of ‘relationship marketing’ and higher education in recent years, despite objections from many academics, has become an object for marketisation. The white paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System explicitly warned that ‘*all universities must offer a good student experience to remain competitive.*’ (2011:5). As private providers seek to enter the HE market, and the Green Paper is actively seeking to enable them to do so, the evidence of personal recommendations from individuals who are identified as role models will continue to be important to prospective students.

However there appears an opportunity for improving institutional data from degree courses by indicating the trajectory of graduates from previous years in terms of their career paths, the number employed, the number in graduate posts and their perceptions of value in their own degree experiences. With technology now available it is easier and cheaper to maintain contact post-graduation but it was evident from responses within Phase 1 that for some it appeared a one way process. Mutual benefits and genuine involvement need to be developed.

It is possible that the increasing neo-liberal discourse around individual evaluation may result in individuals recommending courses of action in which they have themselves invested in because they perceive these to have been of value. However it is additionally possible that they consciously or unconsciously seek to encourage others to make such decisions to reinforce their own paradox of choices.

### 7.3 Conclusion

The research findings identified and analysed in this thesis demonstrate that graduate perceptions of value have relevance and the capacity to inform individuals, institutions and society about the value of an undergraduate degree.

The advantages of employing the graduate voice can be identified in three main ways:

1. For prospective and current students in improving understanding of the quality of the value, and where this lies within a degree, based on impact of graduate case studies and other projects (Collins & Ingham, 2015) enabling the development of realistic expectations and self-authorship of goals to maximise opportunities in their student learning experiences.
2. For institutions in understanding, monitoring and changing value perceptions over time as well as identifying institutionally-specific allocations of value amongst their own graduate populations.
3. For society as a whole in terms of understanding the breadth of degree value and impact.

It is clear from the discourse surrounding higher education over recent decades that as Scott put it, *“Once students went to university for education. Now it’s an ‘experience’”* (2015, Guardian). This work takes into account that whilst some elements of the degree experience will change due to the altered ‘offer’ from institutions, the perceptions of value among responding graduates up to 42 years from graduation remained remarkably static in their rejection of the emphasis of the hegemonic discourse.

It is essential for the sustainability of higher education to have the engagement and voices of graduates to evidence higher education as a lasting, valuable experience. It is important as costs rise and alternatives to a degree abound, to develop a full perception of degree value including the economic whilst recognising the breadth and if necessary reposition the marketing of a degree using the evidence of the graduate voice.

This research indicates that the perceptions of graduates at distances from their experience has relevance for the future of higher education in informing political



policy, institutional policy, current and prospective students of the evidenced value in a degree. It demonstrates graduates have an important and relevant role to play in recalibrating the hegemonic discourse around the value of a degree pre, during, and post the initial experience.

Foucault considered for anyone to yield power well, they must be informed and have understanding. Interviewed in 1978 he outlined understanding as a process resulting in modification of what we know, and as is developed in the course of this work, modifying what we do in order *to* know (Faubion, 2001). Thus higher education institutions can become more knowledgeable, modify and develop with informed, evidenced intelligence through understanding the impact of their work from their graduates in terms of perceived value and graduate journeys. Evaluating the progression of graduates as they journey from their degrees, apply and build upon the knowledge they gained at university employing the lifelong learning skills they learned as undergraduates will provide metrics and data to enhance existing data. Thus individuals and institutions have the power to transform through knowledge.

This study came about because I was bemused and puzzled by the repetitious reliance of HE academics and politicians that a degree was important for life but without evidence to support the assertion. In his introduction to the Green Paper surrounding the Teaching Excellence Framework Johnson indicated a shift in political approach requiring just such evidence:

*“Higher education should deliver lasting value to graduates – and to the taxpayers underwriting the student loan system.”*(BIS 2015:8).

The graduate voice, through this work which began long before a TEF was even proposed, appears an apposite route to meet this requirement. The models developed as a result of the research within this thesis reposition the Graduate Voice and implement it to enhance Perception of Value (Figs. 39 & 40) and demonstrate the legacy of a degree.

## 7.4 Contribution to knowledge

This research aimed to understand the value of an undergraduate degree from graduate perspective. It has identified graduate value in a degree and identified that allocation of that value is broader than the economic/financial cost-benefit analysis of political policy.

Additionally the research identified three main findings with implications for future enhancement of higher education:

- I. statistical significance in the relationship between student entry motivation and perception of value
- II. that those graduates perceiving highest value developed self-authorship during their degree
- III. a significant relationship between high graduate perception of value and likelihood to recommend higher education (and their alma mater).

These findings led to the development of a conceptual model of the importance of graduate voice in perception of value (Fig. 39).

## 7.5 Directions for future research

Discussions have begun around the development of a method for one institution to seek and employ the graduate voice at intervals of 2, 5, 10 and 15 years after graduation. Once such data is available it will be interesting to compare the findings with those of the HEA/HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey and the National Student Survey.

Other areas of research which emerge as a result of this study:

- Evaluation of the Ingham Perception of Value model in a longitudinal study exploring entry motivation and opportunities for self-authorship.
- Evaluating the international data gathered within this project and the specific value relationships of international students who studied their first degrees in the UK. This area for further study appears to have relevance in light of the current emphasis on increasing international student engagement with UK higher education.

- Researching the impact of self-authorship in successful student engagement among students with different entry motivation. Further study could seek to determine the extent to which self-authoring value during a degree is a reason for the success and take-up of engagement projects such as dual mentorship, Peer Assisted Learning, Peer Mentoring, Learning Innovation (Loughborough University, University of Sheffield) and other such schemes. It is evident from the literature that (Tinto, 2000; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Bryson, 2014) the personal and academic development potential within such engagement opportunities offers students the possibility of translating these experiences into future personal and economic advantage. The motivation research suggests self-authorship supports realisation of higher expectations of value (A2, A3, A9 for example) and the ways such development of student identity connects to Heidegger's notion of being (1927 [1962]).

## Personal reflection

During the course of this thesis I have been fortunate to meet many individuals who reinforced the importance of ‘the long view’ of higher education. Working with academics and students alike I have been struck by the differing experiences across institutions and disciplines, and as the research progressed, my ears were opened to the apparent lack of self-authorship articulated within their student experience at all levels of study. The sense is that many feel like passengers rather than participants, and indicate a belief that this has become more prevalent as costs have risen. I believe this study has the potential to enhance engagement through hearing the specific relevance of the graduate voice in drawing out elements of value and the importance of self-authorship, involvement and reflection.

Academic study is a challenge that teaches you as much about yourself as about a discipline. Its value lies in the recognition of that learning and its application to achieve positive influence for others. As a part time doctoral student it has been an important struggle to seek an immersive academic experience in order to develop thought, understanding and direction. In the reflective cycle I recognise that when this thesis and viva stage is complete I will be able to fully evaluate the value of the process and realise the lessons learned. I have been drawn to reflect on the valuable learning I have experienced to date by amending the 7 Ps of marketing practice (Booms & Bitner, 1981) for illustration (Figure 41).

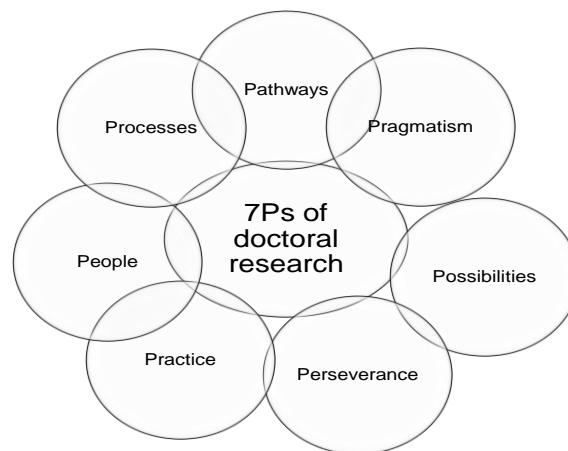


Fig. 41 The 7Ps of Ph.D. research involved in my personal learning journey.

In the short term I have been privileged to gain insight into the values graduates perceive in often fundamentally life-changing experiences in higher education; to develop skills in research; had a precious opportunity to experience a combination of pathways, blind alleys, minor roads and highways to new thinking which have taken delightful albeit often frustrating routes but which have fundamentally changed the way I think and added to my knowledge.

### **Postscript to the Preface**

Alice graduated with a 2:1 in 2015 and accepted a post prior to finishing her degree. This was considered by the company to be a graduate position but attracted a salary of less than £16,000. Within six months she had changed jobs and increased her earnings but not to a post requiring a degree. She considered her university years provided a safe environment to develop friendships, independence and maturity. However she remains unsure whether she would have gained as much if not more through an apprenticeship, or working straight after a degree and living away from home. She knows she could have incurred less debt. It will be interesting to see whether her perceptions change with distance from the experience.

Freya is now at university completing her undergraduate degree and considering her options including continuing to a Masters. She currently recognises her extra-curricular involvement in sport to have been the most valuable element of her degree experience to date.

The importance in learning from the experience of others, namely graduates, remains unheard in a regular, systematic way to enable the value of higher education to be recognised both internally and externally. Perhaps the neo-liberal agenda and discourse will provide the opportunity to focus the value of a degree through the lived experience of those individuals who are the embodiment and ambassadors of higher education and its impact on individuals and society.

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## Appendices

## Appendix 1 Information Sheet for Prospective Interviewees

Your input in this research study is invited to assist in exploring the value added to individuals by the experience of undertaking an undergraduate degree.

Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information, which I hope will answer some, if not all of your questions, and point you in the direction of where to find any additional information you seek.

Study title

**How can the value added to individuals by an undergraduate degree be evaluated, qualified and utilised to inform future students and higher education practice?**

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

Anecdotally higher education transforms lives through self-identity, collective identity, knowledge, understanding and other complex concepts. This research seeks to discover if this is indeed the case for individuals, what factors affect perceptions of value-added in higher education, explore how value-added can be reflected to prospective students, and identify how higher education institutions can increase value-added to their students and graduates.

### **Why have I been invited to participate?**

As an individual who has spoken previously about the transformational impact of higher education upon you and your life, you are one of an initial ten graduates being invited to participate in face-to-face interviews from which questions for a questionnaire will be identified. That questionnaire will be distributed electronically on a large scale.

### **Do I have to take part?**

It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part.

If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw up to six months after your participation without giving a reason.

All your answers will be anonymised unless you expressly ask to be identified.

### **What will happen if I take part?**

The initial interview will be recorded with your consent, and will be expected to take no more than an hour of your time. The recording will be destroyed after a transcript is made and this transcript together with a back up will be stored and only available to the researcher using password-protected access.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Your input could make a difference to future students trying to decide whether to take a degree or not, in understanding the full scope of an undergraduate experience. It could also help determine the way in which institutions such as the one at which you studied, are recognised.

### **Will what I say be kept confidential?**

All information collected relating to your interview will be kept strictly confidential. Information will be anonymised by being given a numeric code, recordings erased after transcription, and the research findings kept securely under password protection for a period of seven years after the completion of the research project. Consent forms will be scanned and held in the same password protected electronic location but will only be available for scrutiny by the Chair of the Institute of Applied Social Research University Ethics Committee for the duration of the research project. Such scrutiny will be only to verify the veracity of the permission granted to the use of the information which you give to the researcher.

**What should I do if I want to take part?**

In order for your feedback to be included in the study please sign the consent form, and hand to the researcher. Alternatively email it to the researcher, Deena Ingham at [Deena.Ingham@beds.ac.uk](mailto:Deena.Ingham@beds.ac.uk)

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The study forms part of a doctoral thesis, and the data collected within this study will be used both in my PhD and it is envisaged in various as yet unspecific academic publications. All information will be anonymised and the identity of participants kept confidential unless participants expressly wish to be identified. The anonymised data will be held for seven years to evidence the validity of the study should there be any challenge to published work. At the end of that time all data will be destroyed.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

This research is being carried out by Deena Ingham, a part-time PhD research student in the Institute of Applied Social Research (IASR) at the University of Bedfordshire). My supervisors are Professor David Barrett and Dr Lucie Shuker. In my full-time role, I am the University's Teaching Enhancement Developer. The research is being supported by the University of Bedfordshire.

Contact for further information  
Professor David Barrett,  
University of Bedfordshire  
Park Square  
Luton  
LU1 3JU

[David.Barrett@beds.ac.uk](mailto:David.Barrett@beds.ac.uk)

Thank you...

...for taking time to read this information sheet and for your contribution to the study to improve knowledge of the impact of higher education on the lives of individuals.

Deena Ingham  
University of Bedfordshire  
Park Square  
LU1 3JU  
December 2011

## Appendix 2 McGivney-based questionnaire showing changes from Phase 1

Questionnaire amended by pilot ( <i>red</i> ) with input from graduates on a 2009 study I conducted ( <i>blue</i> ) included to see if considered relevant by participants. Original McGivney questions in black. Through my degree experience I developed:	Disagree a lot	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Self-confidence					
Ability to work on my own – rephrased from Autonomy during pilot for clarity, self initiative was not something seen as having been gained from the degree during the pilot although was raised in questioning.					
Self-esteem					
Tolerance					
Knowledge of my own capabilities					
Understanding of others					
Wider aspirations					
Changed attitudes					
Personal independence					
Self-criticality					
Personal satisfaction					
Improved social confidence - this and a wider social circle replaced McGivney's social interaction and social participation					
A wider social circle - see Improved social confidence comment.					
Community involvement - this and political awareness were added during the pilot in response to McGivney's civic participation					
Political awareness – see Community involvement comment.					
Direction for my life					
Qualifications					
An improved financial ability					
Knowledge					
Greater awareness of the world					
The skills to get my first job - pilot interpretation of employment skills recognising significant future employment skills learned during that first job					
Career advancement abilities					
Team/group working skills					
New networks					
An ability to work towards collective goals - expanded by pilot considering degree experience a time of learning rather than always achieving in this area					
Awareness of new opportunities					
Self worth					
Improved social skills					
A sense of personal achievement					
A love of learning					
The ability to study					



## Appendix 3 Transcript extract showing coding example

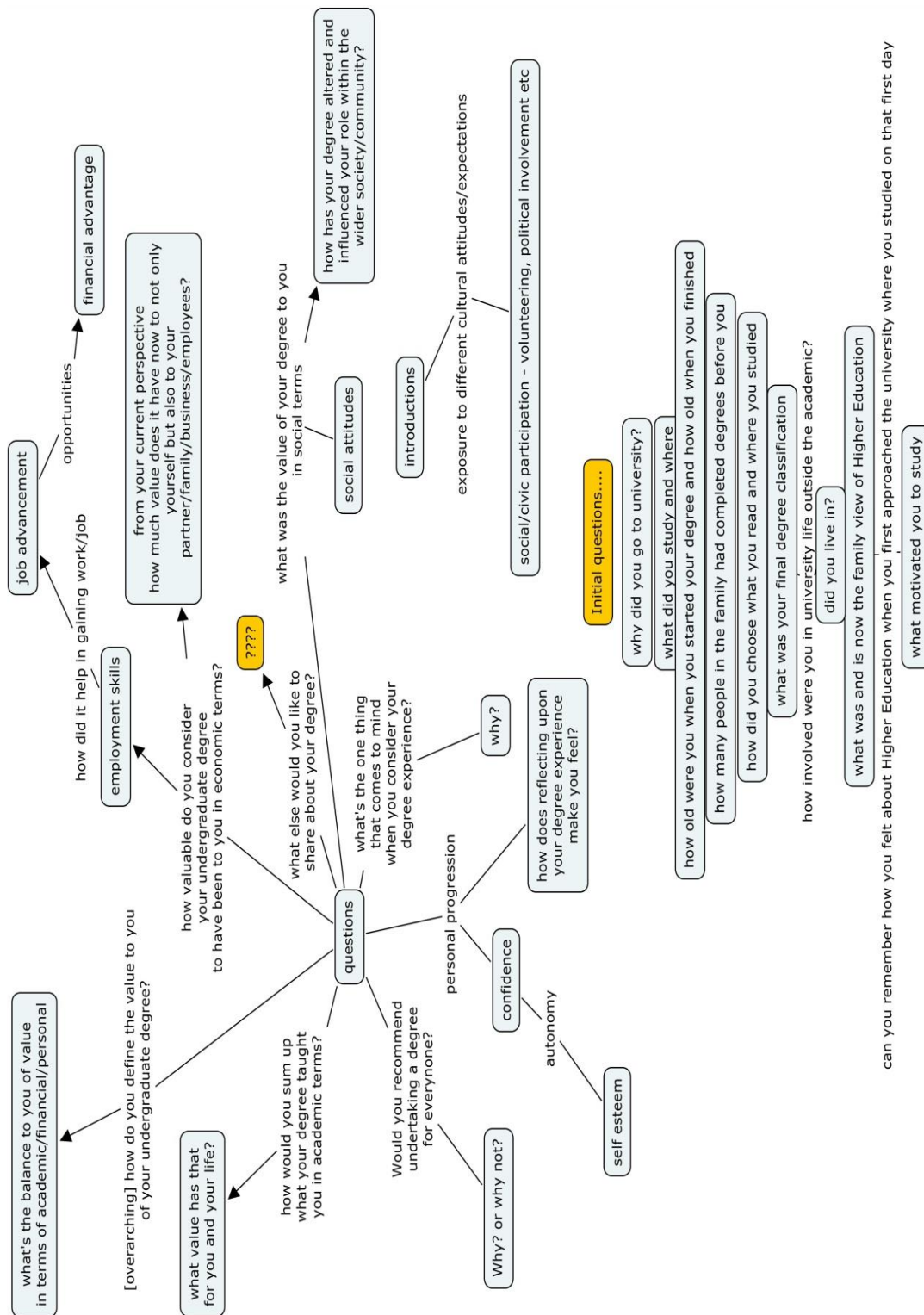
### Coding extract for Appendices

SourceCode	Coded Text
A13 academic motivation	but then second year was work, third year I even dropped my jobs because I knew I would have to knuckle down.
A13 academic motivation	One motivator was money, I knew if I failed this first year it would cost a lot of money, it was competitive too with other people, this other person had got higher and passed so that pushed me. That module was one of the harder modules for me and when you're not motivated and enthused by the subject I just didn't put my all in but then I knew I had to so I just had to keep going whether I was bored or not with the subject, because I knew I had to get above the 40% pass mark and I didn't fail any more after that
A13 academic value	Academically it was what I expected, lectures.. more lectures, taking lots of notes. The content was what I expected, coursework was...coursework just like school really.
A13 achievement	I got a 2.1,
A13 achievement	knowing that I got that 2.1 extremely happy, proud.
A13 career expectation	[name of uni] was seen as the best university at the time for teaching according to hearsay and the internet – Mum did research that said that too
A13 career expectation	I wanted to do the teaching, but I realised I wanted to have a pathway, so I went into doing education and childhood studies and with the modules that I had it weighted more towards early childhood studies and it became with as a joint.
A13 earning through choice	I had two jobs going at the time at Chelsea and Twickenham, so at weekends that was always covered by work and sometimes in the evenings.
A13 earning through choice	I was working as extra, I could have survived just about without the work. I had a loan, and Mum and Dad helped out too. I was in halls for the first year, then I had a house for the second year, and then moved back into halls for the third year.
A13 employer recognition negative	In how I've gone on after university I haven't needed my degree as such. I have in the job I have now but I don't feel that I've needed it. People have come with experience and no degree and come on top of me. In how I've gone on after university I haven't needed my degree as such. Getting my first job I didn't need that degree.
A13 employer recognition negative	I have in the job I have now, but I don't feel that I've needed it.
A13 expectational pressure	I felt pressured in the way that all the cousins... it's always been driving tests - you have to pass first time, cousins all got 2.1s and so if I was to get a 2.2 that wouldn't have been good. Now I know how [name] feels because he's under pressure now he's at uni. I got a 2.1, we've all got 2.1s I think the pressure comes not from siblings but from other family members.
A13 expectational pressure	I felt pressured in the way that because all the cousins got 2.1s and so if I was to get a 2.2 that wouldn't have been good.
A13 extra curricular low	I joined the rowing club and another housemate did as well, but the early starts just didn't work for me so I didn't row for long.

A13	funding	I had a loan, and Mum and Dad helped out too.
A13	financial motivation	One motivator was money, I knew if I failed this first year it would cost a lot of money,
A13	lack of recognition	No. I wouldn't recommend everyone to do a degree. In how I've gone on after university I haven't needed my degree as such. I have in the job I have now but I don't feel that I've needed it. People have come with experience and no degree and come on top of me. In how I've gone on after university I haven't needed my degree as such. Getting my first job I didn't need that degree. I have in the job I have now, but I don't feel that I've needed it. People have come with experience and no degree and come on top of me. I wonder whether my degree is important to me know.
A13	motivation for career	I wanted to do the teaching, but I realised I wanted to have a pathway
A13	peer pressure	it was competitive too with other people, this other person had got higher and passed so that pushed me.
A13	peer pressure	School friends as in upper school, yes. With school friends there was, what have you got? What are you doing? How are you doing?
A13	personal aspiration	I knew that everyone expected me to go - so I expected to go too.
A13	personal aspiration	I wanted to do the teaching, but I realised I wanted to have a pathway, so I went into doing education and childhood studies and with the modules that I had it weighted more towards early childhood studies and it became with as a joint.
A13	personal aspiration	It was me..I mean I made the decision and I was the one who went..um but um.. it was because of everyone else I suppose. To be honest.. anything else I didn't seriously consider.
A13	personal independence	It's awful, it should be the work...but the value's in being away from home. The first year I really made the most of living away from family not having any curfews and I went out 3 times a week probably and worked, because it's the freedom but then second year was work, third year I even dropped my jobs because I knew I would have to knuckle down.
A13	PERSONAL negative	Tough times with friendship groups in that there was always blips in the house and having to sort out the bills and there was conflicts there.
A13	personal social value	The first year I really made the most of living away from family not having any curfews and I went out 3 times a week probably and worked, because it's the freedom
A13	prior expectation	I knew that everyone expected me to go - so I expected to go too
A13	prior expectation	[name of uni] was seen as the best university at the time for teaching according to hearsay and the internet – Mum did research that said that too

A13	prior expectation	I always thought I'd go straight, if I'd had a gap year I wouldn't have got to university. (laugh) I'd never have gone back to studying and I knew that.
A13	prior expectation	I felt pressured in the way that all the cousins... it's always been driving tests - you have to pass first time, cousins all got 2.1s and so if I was to get a 2.2 that wouldn't have been good. Now I know how [name] feels because he's under pressure now he's at uni. I got a 2.1, we've all got 2.1s I think the pressure comes not from siblings but from other family members.
A13	prior expectation	It was me..I mean I made the decision and I was the one who went..um but um.. it was because of everyone else I suppose. To be honest.. anything else I didn't seriously consider.
A13	recommendation negative	No. I wouldn't recommend everyone to do a degree. In how I've gone on after university I haven't needed my degree as such.
A13	school entrant	I was 18 straight after 6th form.
A13	soft applied Biglan	BA Hons Education with Early Childhood Studies
A13	student lifestyle	I was in halls for the first year, then I had a house for the second year, and then moved back into halls for the third year. The first year I really made the most of living away from family, not having any curfews and I went out most nights probably and worked for money because I could - it's the freedom that was so fantastic .

## Appendix 4 Concept map for interviews



## Appendix 5 Meanings articulated by graduates within the triad and how this informed Phase 2 development

	Research Question	Survey Item
<b>Independent variable</b>		
Gender	Are you Male/ Female	Q2
Educational background pre-degree	Was your last schooling before leaving compulsory education – indicate all that apply What was the highest qualification you had achieved BEFORE you entered University	Q3 Q14
Funding	Did you receive a scholarship etc.	Q22
Motivation for degree	Why did you choose to go to university	Q10
Age at entry	How old were you when you started your undergraduate (Bachelor's level) degree?	Q4
First in family	Were you the first in your immediate family to study at university level?	Q5
Discipline (per Biglan)	What is the title of your degree	Q15
Institution	With which institution did you complete your undergraduate degree, if more than one etc. Did you study with more than one etc. Did you study for your degree at etc. In which country did you complete etc. Was the university you graduated from your first choice etc.	Q16 Q7 Q8 Q6 Q9
Working during degree	During your studies were you employed for financial gain outside your degree, at any time, not counting any course internship or placement How much time did you spend working for money during your first degree	Q12 Q13
Classification	What degree classification were you awarded How did your final classification compare etc.	Q23 Q24
Employment status at time of survey	Looking at your employment experience what percentage of etc. What is your status today Are you working in an area directly connected etc. If working in an area directly connected etc. What is your current job title	Q25 Q26 Q27 Q28 Q29
Accommodation	When you were completing your degree did you live...etc.	Q11
Mode of study and degree structure	How did you study Did you study full time etc. Did your course contain any work based elements	Q17 Q18 Q19
Duration of study	How long did you study for your undergraduate degree	Q20
Ethnic group	What is your ethnic group	Q33
Disability or SpLD	During your studies were you affected etc. Please indicate all that are applicable	Q34 Q35
Language	What is/are your first language/s	Q36
<b>Dependent Variables</b>		
<b>Personal value</b>		
	If you were to divide your entire etc.	Q31
Written communication	In which ways do you consider your first degree experience added value to you	Q30
Self-discipline	ditto	Q30
Ability to work on my own	ditto	Q30
Team/group working skills	ditto	Q30

Improved social skills	ditto	Q30
Tolerance of others	ditto	Q30
Knowledge of own capabilities	ditto	Q30
Sense of self worth	ditto	Q30
Improved understanding of others	ditto	Q30
Ability to shoulder responsibility	ditto	Q30
Self-esteem	ditto	Q30
Political awareness	ditto	Q30
Awareness of new opportunities	ditto	Q30
Spoken communication	ditto	Q30
Presentation skills	ditto	Q30
<b>Academic value</b>	If you were to divide your entire etc.	Q31
Subject knowledge	Thinking about your academic learning during your degree etc.	Q32
Approaches to problem solving, research, evaluation	ditto	Q32
Practical skills related to subject	ditto	Q32
Improved communication abilities	ditto	Q32
Ability to work in a team	ditto	Q32
Ability to work on own	ditto	Q32
Ability to learn from different situations, different tasks	ditto	Q32
Ability to learn from your mistakes	ditto	Q32
Leadership skills	ditto	Q32
Added no value	ditto	Q32
Written communication	In which ways do you consider your first degree experience added value to you	Q30
Self-discipline	ditto	Q30
Ability to work on my own	ditto	Q30
Team/group working skills	ditto	Q30
Improved social skills	ditto	Q30
Tolerance of others	ditto	Q30
Knowledge of own capabilities	ditto	Q30
Sense of self worth	ditto	Q30
Improved understanding of others	ditto	Q30
Ability to shoulder responsibility	ditto	Q30
Self-esteem	ditto	Q30
Political awareness	ditto	Q30
Awareness of new opportunities	ditto	Q30
Spoken communication	ditto	Q30

Presentation skills	ditto	Q30
<b>Economic value</b>	If you were to divide your entire etc.	Q31
<b>Control variable</b>		
Value/no value attributed overall	Do you feel your degree has added value What was the single element of your first degree etc.	Q40 Q41
<b>Control questions</b>		
Graduate participant	Have you completed a first degree	Q1
Year of graduation	In which year did you graduate	Q21
Recommendation	Would you recommend others to do a degree Would you recommend the institution that you went to etc. Would you recommend your specific degree course etc.	Q37 Q38 Q39
Location of study	In which country did you complete etc.	Q6

## Appendix 6 Phase 2 survey

When making a trip of a lifetime you don't want to miss out on the experiences which could make it more memorable, more valuable, more worthwhile. You are reliant on others who have been there before you, because their knowledge can help you make the most of your journey. Your contribution of hindsight is essential to this PhD research. With your help, exploring the value of a degree will enable undergraduates, academics, institutions and politicians to understand and maximize the potential of higher education, ensuring future generations are able to make the most of what is a costly journey in both personal and financial terms. The questionnaire takes on average 10 minutes to complete depending on the number of questions which apply to you. An indicator bar at the bottom of the page shows your progress through the survey. The information you provide is anonymous, and stored securely for the duration of the PhD study, according to the university's data protection and ethics regulations. No publications will cite findings in a way which enables you, your university, college or employers to be individually identified. If you have any questions at all please do not hesitate to contact me via email - [deena.ingham@beds.ac.uk](mailto:deena.ingham@beds.ac.uk) Alternatively you may wish to contact my supervisor Professor David Barrett - [david.barrett@beds.ac.uk](mailto:david.barrett@beds.ac.uk) Thank you very much for your involvement. Deena Ingham

To start the survey please click the double arrow box on the bottom right of the page

Q39 Have you completed a first degree (i.e. undergraduate, Bachelors)?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Q1 These first questions help put your responses in context Are you:

- ☐ Male (1)
- ☐ Female (2)

Q3 Was your last schooling before leaving compulsory education - indicate all that apply

- ☐ State school (1)
- ☐ Private school (2)
- ☐ Other - please state (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Q4 How old were you when you started your undergraduate (Bachelors level) degree?

- ☐ 17-18 (1)
- ☐ 19-20 (2)
- ☐ 21-24 (3)
- ☐ 25-30 (4)
- ☐ 31-40 (5)
- ☐ 41-50 (6)
- ☐ 51-60 (7)
- ☐ over 60 (8)

Q5 Were you the first in your immediate family (defined as parents, brothers or sisters) to study at university level?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q44 In which country did you complete your undergraduate degree? [If you have studied for more than one undergraduate degree in more than one country please indicate all the countries concerned in the order you studied in them]. If you completed your degree by distance learning please indicate the country you were in when studying followed by DL and the country of the degree provider (e.g. England DL Scotland).



Q5a Did you study with more than one institution whilst completing your undergraduate degree?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q53 Did you study for your degree at a university, or another institution? NB After this question all institutions will be referred to as universities purely for ease but your response will have logged your experience

- ☐ university (1)
- ☐ other, please indicate type of institution i.e. conservatoire, college, polytechnic etc. (2)

\_\_\_\_\_

Q6 Was the university you graduated from:

- ☐ Your first choice (1)
- ☐ Your second choice (2)
- ☐ Selected through 'clearing' (UK) or equivalent process (3)
- ☐ One to which you moved during your degree experience (4)

Q7 Why did you choose to go to university? Indicate all that apply

- ☐ Expected of you (1)
- ☐ Personal aspiration (2)
- ☐ Specific career goal which required a degree (3)
- ☐ Other - please indicate your main reason in the box below (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Q8 When you were completing your degree did you - please complete all which apply

- ☐ Live at home, your own home or parental home (1)
- ☐ Live in university accommodation - whether run by the university or a private provider for the university (2)
- ☐ Rent privately (3)
- ☐ Live with relatives (4)
- ☐ Other - please specify (5) \_\_\_\_\_

Q9 During your studies were you employed for financial gain outside your degree, at any time, not counting any course internship or placement?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

**Answer If During your degree were you also employed and earning? Yes Is Selected**

Q9a How much time did you spend working for money during your first degree - indicate all which apply

- ☐ Up to 16 hours a week (part-time/casual) (1)
- ☐ 16-25 hours a week (part time) (2)
- ☐ 25+ hours a week (full-time) (3)
- ☐ Holidays only (4)
- ☐ Did not work for money during studies (5)

Q52 What was the highest qualification you had achieved BEFORE you entered University?

Q10 Moving on to your degree itself. What is the title of your degree? e.g. BSc Hons. Anthropology, BEd etc.

Q11 With which institution did you complete your undergraduate degree? If more than one please write them in the order in which you studied with the institution from which you graduated last e.g. Casterbridge Wessex

Q51 How did you study? Please indicate both if both apply

- ☐ Distance learning (1)
- ☐ In person learning (2)

Q12 Did you study full time, part time or a mixture of both?

- ☐ Full time (1)
- ☐ Part time (2)
- ☐ Both full time and part time (3)

Q13 Did your course contain any work based elements:

- ☐ Working for a set period in course-related industry/profession may be known as sandwich or placement (1)
- ☐ Work experience (2)
- ☐ None (3)
- ☐ Other type - please give detail (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Q14 How long did you study for your undergraduate degree?

- ☐ 3 years (1)
- ☐ 4 years (2)
- ☐ More than 4 years (3)
- ☐ Less than 3 years (4)

Q15 In which year did you graduate?

- ☐ Please enter the year you graduated (1) \_\_\_\_\_

Q16 Did you receive a scholarship, bursary or grant during your studies?

- ☐ Scholarship (1)
- ☐ Bursary (2)
- ☐ Grant (3)
- ☐ None (4)

Q17 What degree classification were you awarded?

- ☐ First Class Honours (1)
- ☐ 2:1 Upper Second Class Honours (2)
- ☐ Unclassified Second Class Honours (3)
- ☐ 2:2 Lower Second Class Honours (4)
- ☐ Third Class Honours (5)
- ☐ Ordinary degree (unclassified) (6)
- ☐ Other - please specify (7) \_\_\_\_\_

Q18 How did your final classification compare with what you hoped for when you first entered university?

- ☐ Higher (1)
- ☐ Lower (2)
- ☐ As expected (3)
- ☐ Not sure (4)

Q21 Looking at your employment experience, what percentage of your time since your graduation has been spent

- \_\_\_\_\_ Working in your chosen area/s whether connected to your degree subject or not (1)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Working but NOT in your chosen area/s (2)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Not working - not by choice (3)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Not working by choice, for any reason, including family, personal etc. (4)

Q20 What is your status today - please indicate all that apply

- ☐ Employed - full, part or self (1)
- ☐ Unemployed (2)
- ☐ Studying (4)
- ☐ Other - please specify below (5) \_\_\_\_\_

Answer If Considering the time since your degree. Are you currently employed Is Selected And Considering the time since your degree. Are you currently self-employed Is Selected

Q20a Are you working in an area directly connected with your degree subject?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Answer If Are you working in an area directly connected with your d... No Is Selected

Q20b What is your current job title?

- ☐ please specify below (1) \_\_\_\_\_

Q23 In which ways do you consider your first degree experience added value to you[1 \* indicates no value, 2 \*\* a little value, 3 \*\*\* some value, 4 \*\*\*\* considerable value, 5 \*\*\*\*\* immense value]

- \_\_\_\_\_ written communication (1)
- \_\_\_\_\_ self-discipline (2)
- \_\_\_\_\_ self-confidence (3)
- \_\_\_\_\_ ability to work on my own (4)
- \_\_\_\_\_ team/group working skills (5)
- \_\_\_\_\_ improving social skills (6)
- \_\_\_\_\_ tolerance of others (7)
- \_\_\_\_\_ knowledge of my own capabilities (8)
- \_\_\_\_\_ sense of self-worth (9)
- \_\_\_\_\_ improved understanding of others (10)
- \_\_\_\_\_ ability to shoulder responsibility (11)
- \_\_\_\_\_ self-esteem (12)
- \_\_\_\_\_ political awareness (13)
- \_\_\_\_\_ awareness of new opportunities (14)
- \_\_\_\_\_ spoken communication (15)
- \_\_\_\_\_ presentation skills (16)

Q25 If you were to divide your entire degree experience allocating a percentage value to each of the following elements how would you make that division? The comment box is available if you wish to elaborate your responses

- \_\_\_\_\_ Financial advantages (1)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Personal development (2)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Knowledge/skills development (3)

Q47 Thinking about your academic learning during your degree - how do you feel it added value to you? (please indicate all which apply)

- ☐ Subject knowledge (1)
- ☐ Approaches to problem solving, research, evaluation (2)
- ☐ Practical skills related to your subject (3)
- ☐ Improved communication abilities (4)
- ☐ Ability to work in a team (5)
- ☐ Ability to work on your own (6)
- ☐ Ability to learn from different situations, different tasks (7)
- ☐ Ability to learn from your mistakes (8)
- ☐ Leadership skills (9)
- ☐ Added no value (10)

Q27 Putting your experience into context What is your ethnic group?

- ☐ Asian - Bangladeshi (1)
- ☐ Asian - Chinese (2)
- ☐ Asian - Indian (3)
- ☐ Asian - other (4)
- ☐ Asian - Pakistani (5)
- ☐ Black - African (6)
- ☐ Black - Caribbean (7)
- ☐ Black - other (8)
- ☐ White (9)
- ☐ White and Asian (10)
- ☐ White and Black African (11)
- ☐ White and Black Caribbean (12)
- ☐ Other Mixed (13)
- ☐ Other (14)

Q42 During your studies were you affected by disability or specific learning difficulty?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Answer If During your studies were you affected by any disability o... yes Is Selected

Q28 Please indicate all that are applicable

- ☐ dyslexia (1)
- ☐ blind/partial sight (2)
- ☐ deaf/hearing impairment (3)
- ☐ mobility difficulties (4)
- ☐ personal care support (5)
- ☐ mental health difficulties (6)
- ☐ autistic spectrum disorders (7)
- ☐ an unseen disability such as diabetes, epilepsy, asthma etc. (8)
- ☐ multiple disabilities (9)
- ☐ other long-term illness or disability (10)
- ☐ prefer not to answer (11)
- ☐ other - please specify (12) \_\_\_\_\_

Q29 What is/are your first language/s?

Q30 Would you recommend others to do a degree?

- ☐ Definitely yes (1)
- ☐ Probably yes (2)
- ☐ Probably not (3)
- ☐ Definitely not (4)
- ☐ Other - please indicate below (5) \_\_\_\_\_

Q32 Would you recommend the institution that you went to to others?

- ☐ Definitely yes (1)
- ☐ Probably yes (2)
- ☐ Maybe (3)
- ☐ Probably not (4)
- ☐ Definitely not (5)
- ☐ Other - please indicate below (6) \_\_\_\_\_

Q45 Would you recommend your specific degree course to others?

- ☐ Definitely yes (1)
- ☐ Probably yes (2)
- ☐ Maybe (3)
- ☐ Probably not (4)
- ☐ Definitely not (5)
- ☐ Other - please indicate below (6) \_\_\_\_\_

Q31 Do you feel your first degree has added value to you as an individual?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q43 What was the single element of your first degree experience which you consider added most value to you as an individual

Q50 Thank you very much for contributing to this research. Your response has been recorded. If you have any questions or would like more details of the research outcomes when these are complete, please contact Deena Ingham [deena.ingham@beds.ac.uk](mailto:deena.ingham@beds.ac.uk) or Professor David Barrett [David.Barrett@beds.ac.uk](mailto:David.Barrett@beds.ac.uk)

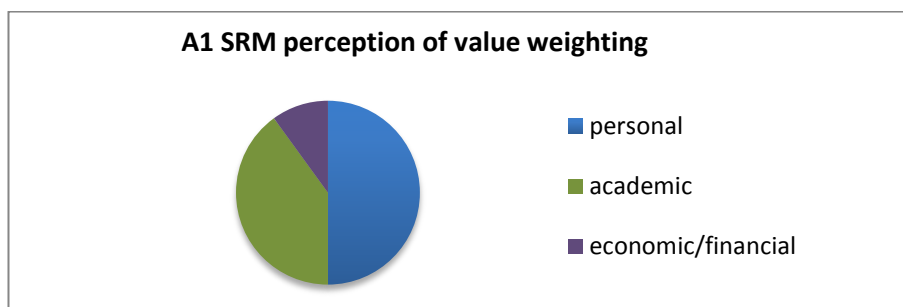
## Appendix 7 Interview vignettes

The order in which these are presented has been randomly generated and is not the order in which interviews were conducted. Each vignette highlights the key areas arising in terms of summarised value and/or areas identified as lacking in value. Additional questions arising from the interview are included to inform the analysis. The analysis given for A1 is indicative of that conducted for each.

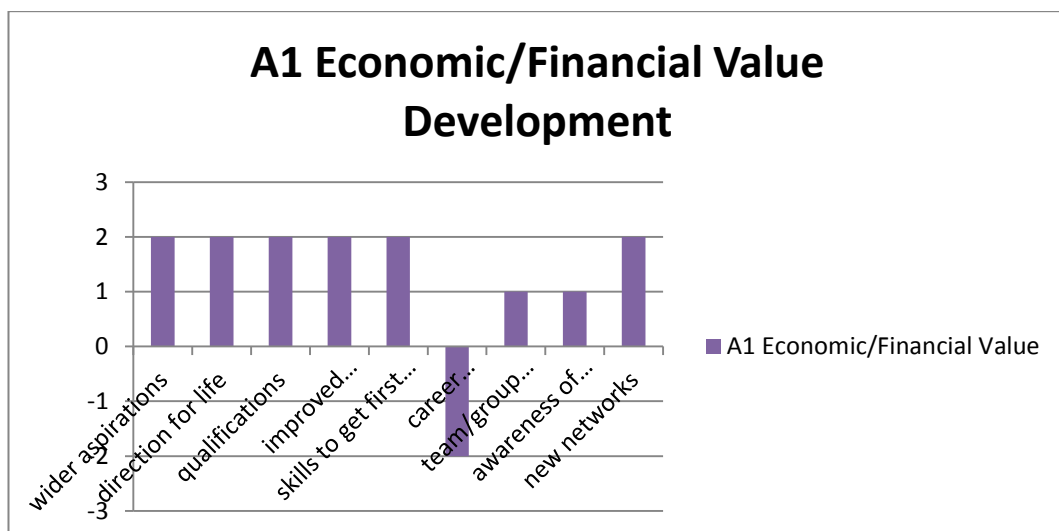
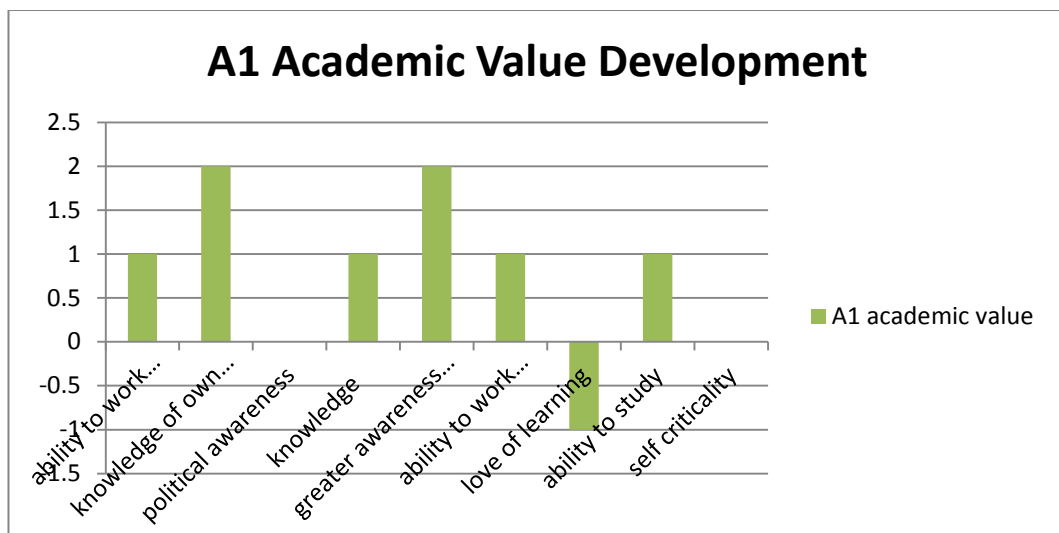
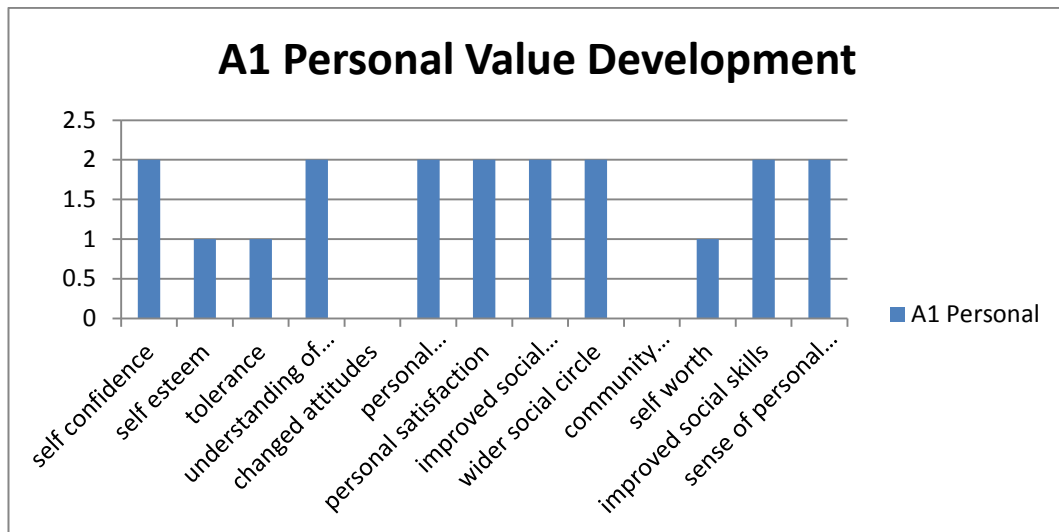
Bar charts indicate responses to the McGivney-based questionnaire (Appendix 2) grouping these according to the participants' allocation of these aspects into personal, academic and economic/financial values. A 5-point Likert scale was used ranging from disagree a lot (-2) to strongly agree (+2).

### A1

A1 was a white British male graduate of a post-92 institution interviewed 10 years after graduation. His mother studied at degree level as a mature student post-divorce to secure the means to support her sons. She was a clear influence on A1's decision to go to university and his belief in a degree as a route to economic security. Having failed to obtain the A-level grades in his grammar school at to read psychology at a pre-92 university, he retok them without improvement before seeking a degree course through clearing - something he "would enjoy". He chose media production because he "thought it would be fun". He began his degree aged 19, lived in halls or rented privately, and graduated with a First Class classification after three years. When interviewed he was working in his chosen area as he had been continuously post-graduation although with limited career advancement.



A1		
Area	SRM value of experience weighting	Development value mean
Personal	50	1.46
Academic	40	0.87
Economic/financial	10	1.33



All research tools showed A1 was positive of the value accrued because of his degree in terms of personal and social development. The questionnaire showed he considered personal development as the most significant value and this

aligned with his interview responses. In interview this was identified as stemming from his student lifestyle, living away from home and from the recognition his degree achievement had brought him from peers, family and in meeting his own articulated generic belief that a degree has value. The success of achieving his degree and thus meeting expectational pressures placed upon him by family, school teachers and his own expectations developed from these further enhanced his value perception.

In the questionnaire he placed academic value lowest but within the interview and SRM indicated economic/financial development to have been of least value to him. In the interview he expressed negative valence, saying that his degree had been of no value in career advancement terms citing his employers' lack of articulated recognition of his degree. This was an approach he, in his own role as an interviewer of prospective employees had also adopted. He did however recognise that the practical skills gained through his degree had been responsible for him securing work experience which led to his first job, and that his degree had high applicability in his daily work.

Within his interview he expressed unmet academic expectations that academic value 'should be something you get from a degree' and surprise that he had been awarded a First Class degree, a classification higher than he expected. This may also stem from the fact that he was forced to change to a soft applied discipline rather than his original goal of soft pure, after a failure to achieve required A-level results reduced his self-efficacy in selecting his own direction. This perception that his classification was misaligned to the input he considered he had made during his degree potentially devalued his perception of its value.

This appeared to have influenced his view that there was no value for him in continuing study, considering 'on the job experience' as more valuable, although colleagues in his milieu were undertaking further academic study on a part-time basis.

He considered his degree a self-centred experience. This was identified in the questionnaire as well as in interview through a lack of community involvement,



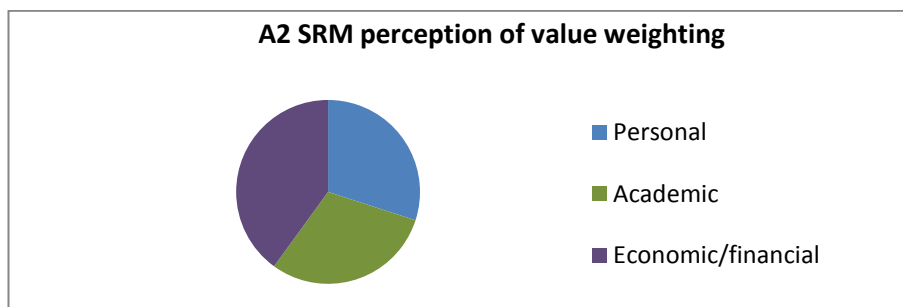
unchanged attitudes and low political awareness combined with a lack of recognition of the tertiary skills developed in terms of analysis and evaluation.

Despite achieving a first, A1's perception of low academic value in his degree may be recognition that he failed to develop these skills which may in turn have adversely influenced his career advancement. This poses the question of whether the academic value was genuinely lower or may be being devalued through lack of awareness, and how this might be addressed within a wider study to develop a greater awareness of the elements which constitute academic value.

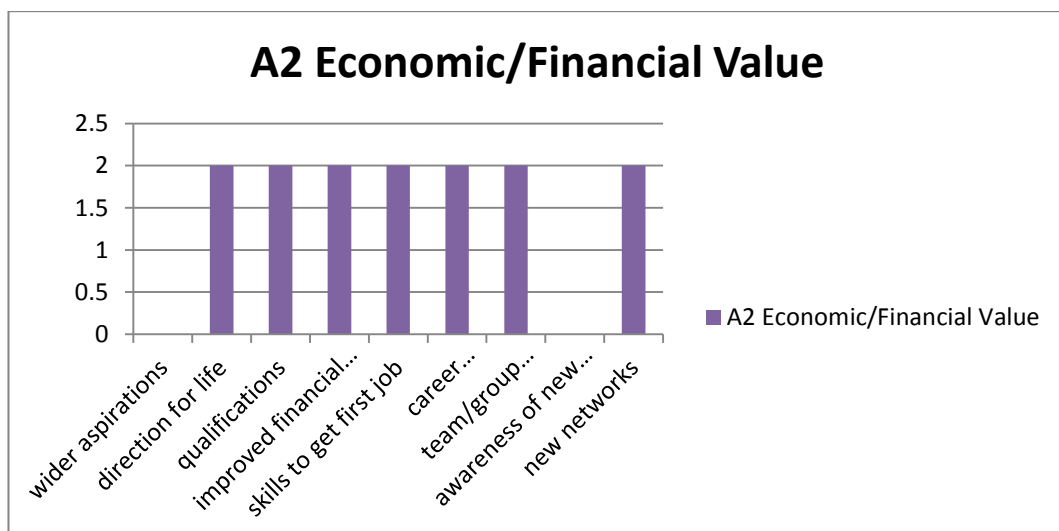
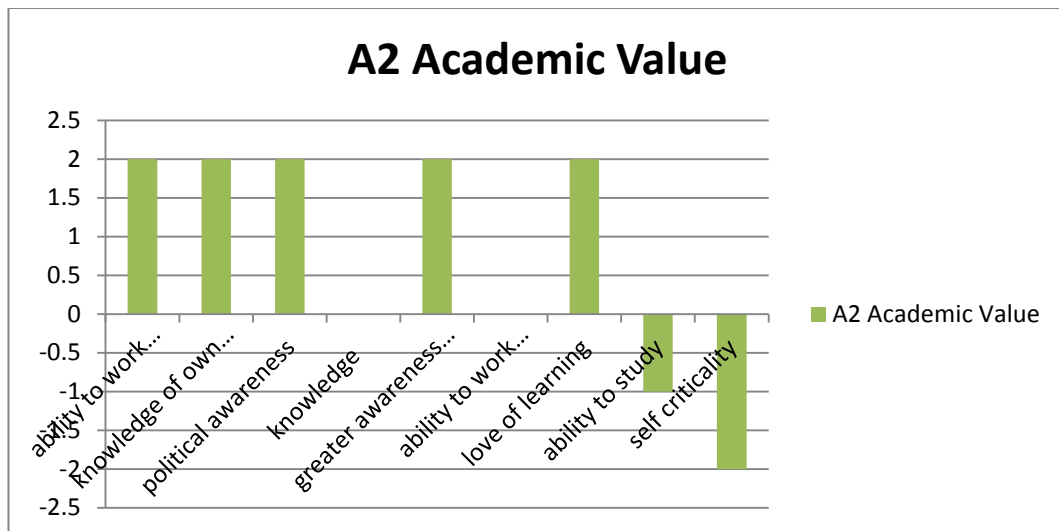
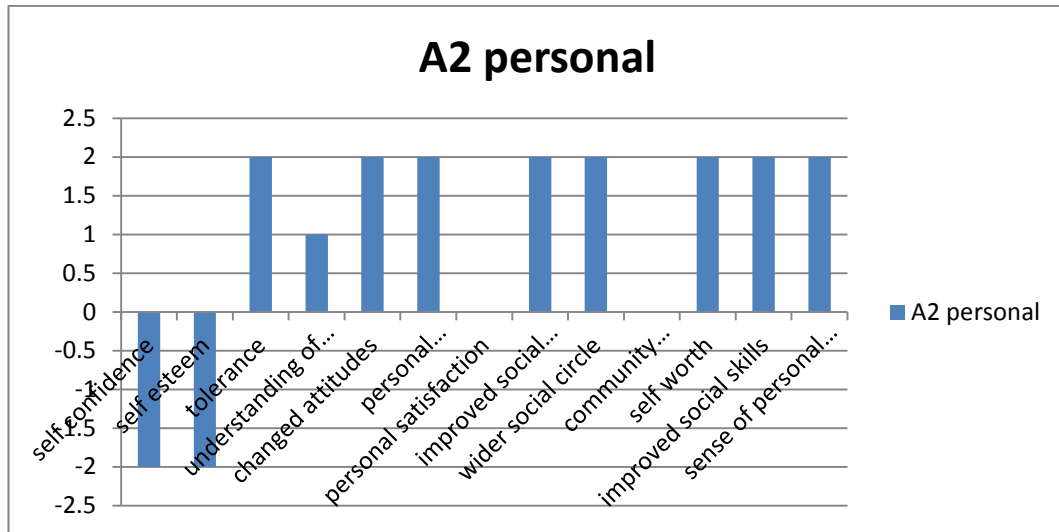
This graduate was regularly involved as an alumnus with prospective graduates at his former university about the value of a degree experience within his chosen career area. In undertaking this work he was personally constantly drawing on his SRM response, thus reinforcing the personal value which had perhaps skewed his perception away from the economic or academic.

## A2

A2 was a white British male graduate who entered a post-92 university straight from grammar school in 1992 to achieve his clear career goal. First in his family to enter higher education, he read English. He had clear goals and his focus was his studies, motivated by a degree being essential for his desired career in teaching. His overriding degree memory was of extreme poverty. He said it never occurred to him to seek part time work, viewing this as the price to pay for the experience. Interviewed whilst working as a Professor of Education in an American university 18 years after he graduated he clearly (perhaps because of his current role) articulated the connection between academic and economic/financial value in his experience. However, perhaps because of criticality developed within and required by his subsequent career path he saw the academic aspect of his experience as lacking its potential value. Using all research tools A2's perceptions of value were relatively evenly matched. In interview he saw the opportunity to reflect and consider the degree value as a whole had enabled him to see that the significant gains he had made in his life since were largely due to his first degree being an enabler. Completing the questionnaire he considered his self-confidence, self-esteem and self-criticality along with an ability to study were established pre-degree, but being at university and meeting others he perceived as more confident and capable and competent had reduced this. This was not seen as a negative, but more as a rebalancing.

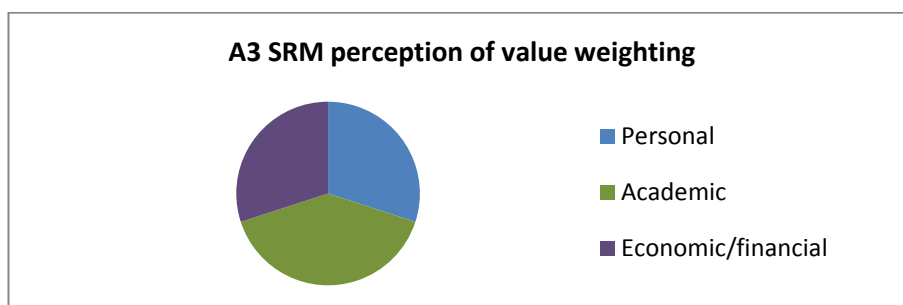


Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	30	1.00
Academic	30	0.77
Economic/financial	40	1.55

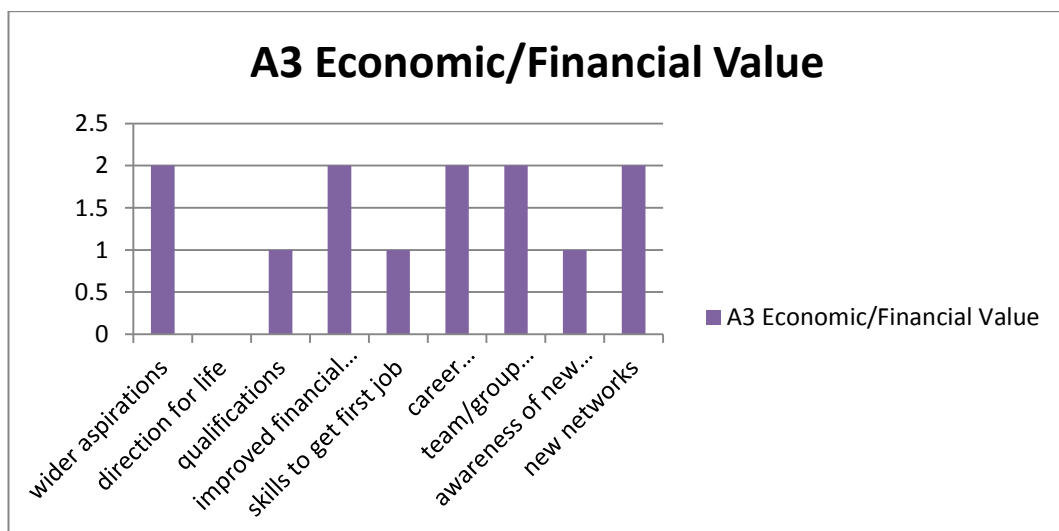
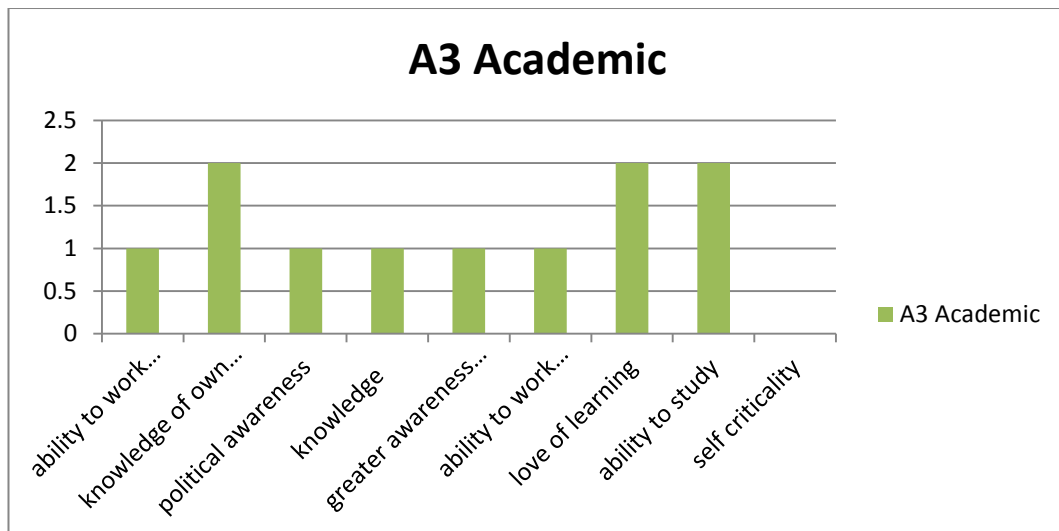
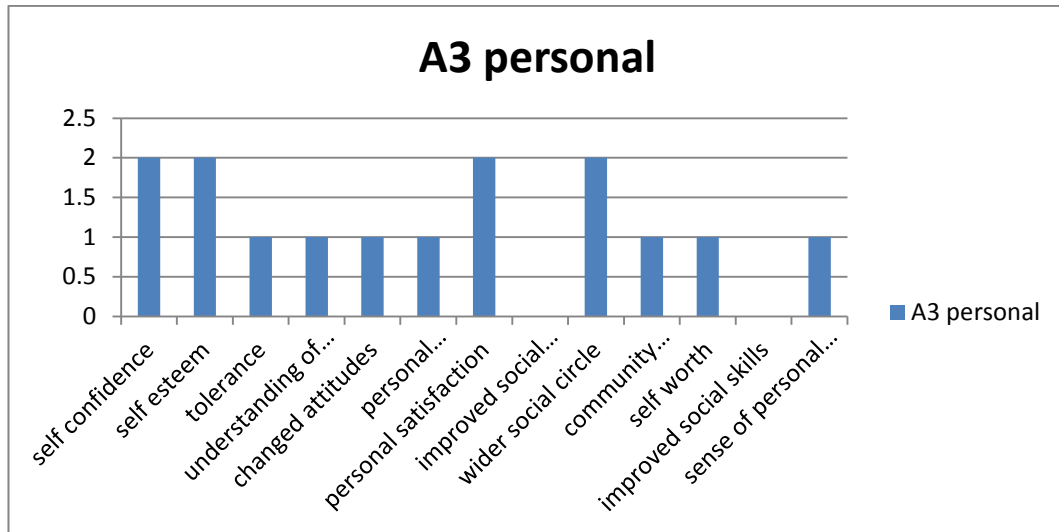


### A3

A clear career goal requiring a degree was A3's motivation achieve a degree. This male British Indian graduate from a widening participation background entered a post '92 university in 2007 from a state school. The second child in his family to study within HE, his initial A-level grades prevented him studying his first subject choice but he took a related course graduating with a 2:2 in a business field and at the time of the interview 2 years post-graduation was continuing to study part-time to achieve his original career goal. For the first year of his degree A3 lived at home and commuted before moving into student accommodation to give him additional study time. At the time of interview he was working full-time an area related to his degree subject. His balanced perception of value across the triad was clearly based on his original expectations founded on career requirements and expressed in interview, SRM and questionnaire responses. His focus was seeing his degree as a single step on the route to his ultimate career goal and he expressed no negative valence. Given that his personal satisfaction related to an aim unachieved at the time of interview it might have been expected A3 would perceive a lack of value in his degree. However he clearly considered his undergraduate experience had developed him effectively towards his ultimate goal. He considered he had developed no value from community involvement despite talking in his interview of playing cricket, being involved in open days, talking with prospective students, and providing advice on a drop-in community project. He considered this an extension of community involvement with which he had been involved prior to university, something which university had enabled him to continue rather than develop.

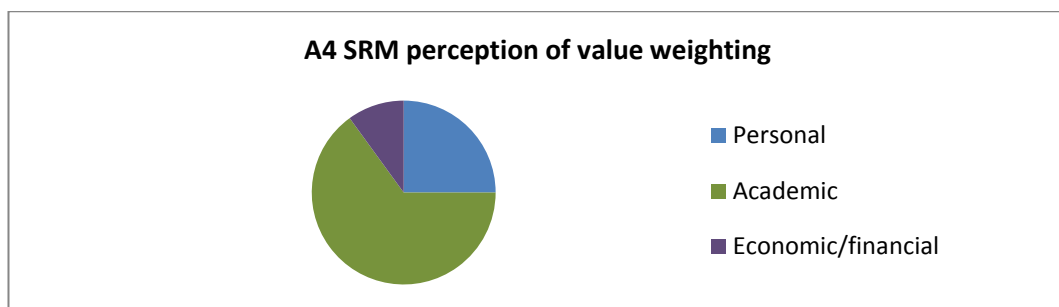


Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	30	1.15
Academic	40	1.22
Economic/financial	30	1.44

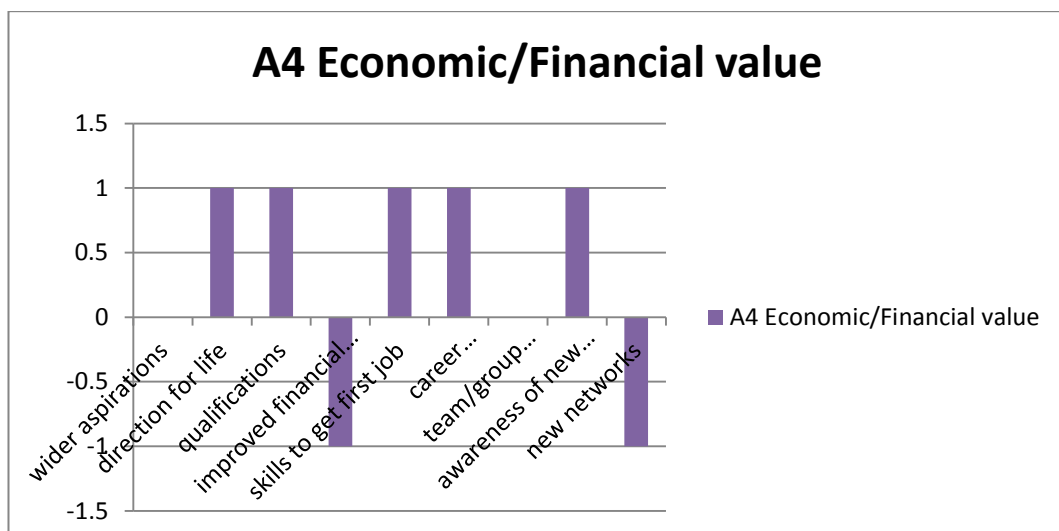
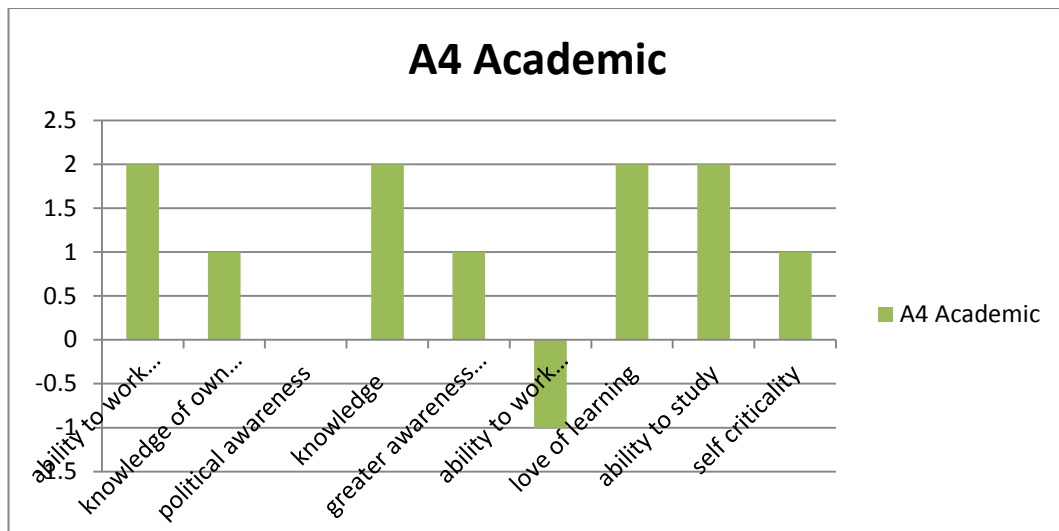
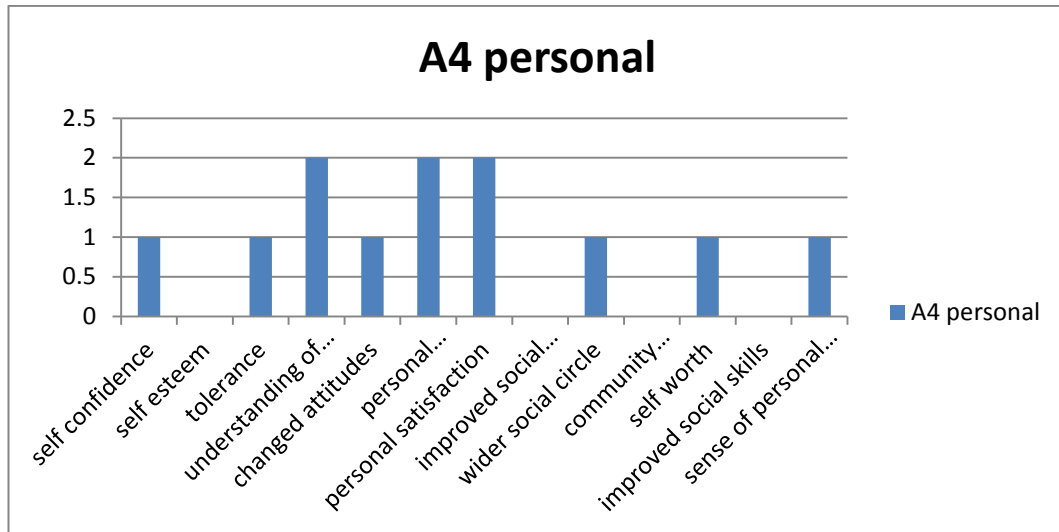


#### A4

A4 was a white British female graduate whose parents had both been to university. She considered expectations of parents and at her state school were drivers which led her to 'never question' that she would go to university. A relationship with an older boyfriend who had not been to university resulted in a gap year before entering a pre-92 institution to read humanities at the age of 19. After a year there living in halls but returning every weekend to her boyfriend, she left that university and enrolled in a post '92 institution geographically closer, to live with him. She graduated 10 years prior to interview with a 2:1. Whilst working at the time of interview she felt she was not in an area that was fulfilling or relevant to her degree. Her summary of value was focused on academic learning but surrounded by a belief that her path into HE was less focused than she felt with hindsight would have been useful. Following expectations of others rather than developing her own career goals and path to achieve these was something she considered with hindsight would have promoted a stronger sense of value accrued. Whilst her move to a second institution took her away from an immersive student lifestyle, and her involvement with her boyfriend she felt prevented her socialising with her peers at university, she considered she had accrued intrinsic personal value. Her lack of self-determination in controlling her degree path because of what she perceived as external pressures to which she acquiesced was evident throughout the interview. She considered these had powerfully influenced her motivation and final value perception. Across all tools A4's evaluation remained the same – perception of significant academic value with personal value following, preceding a very low perception of economic/financial value.

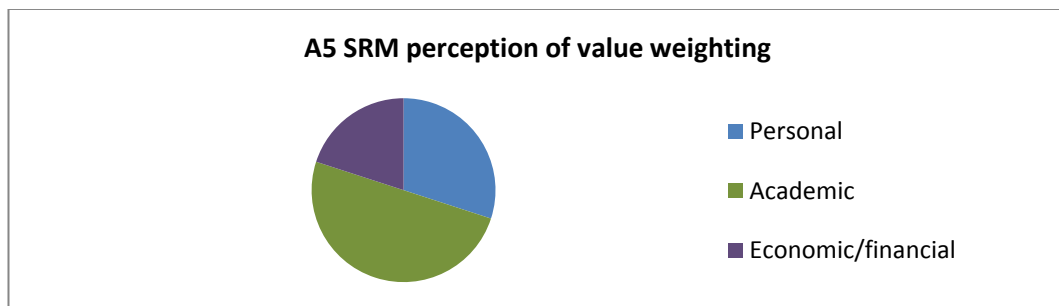


Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	25	0.92
Academic	65	1.11
Economic/financial	10	0.66



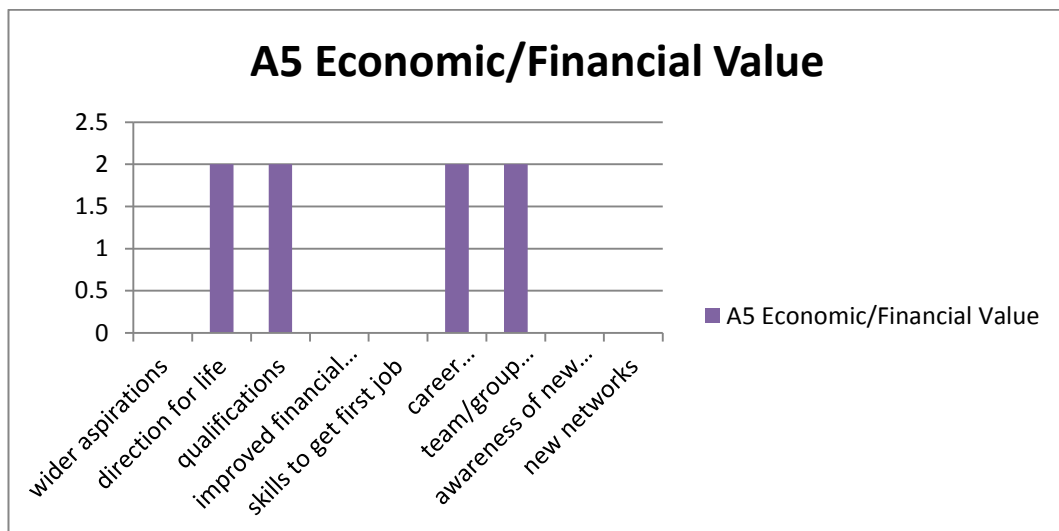
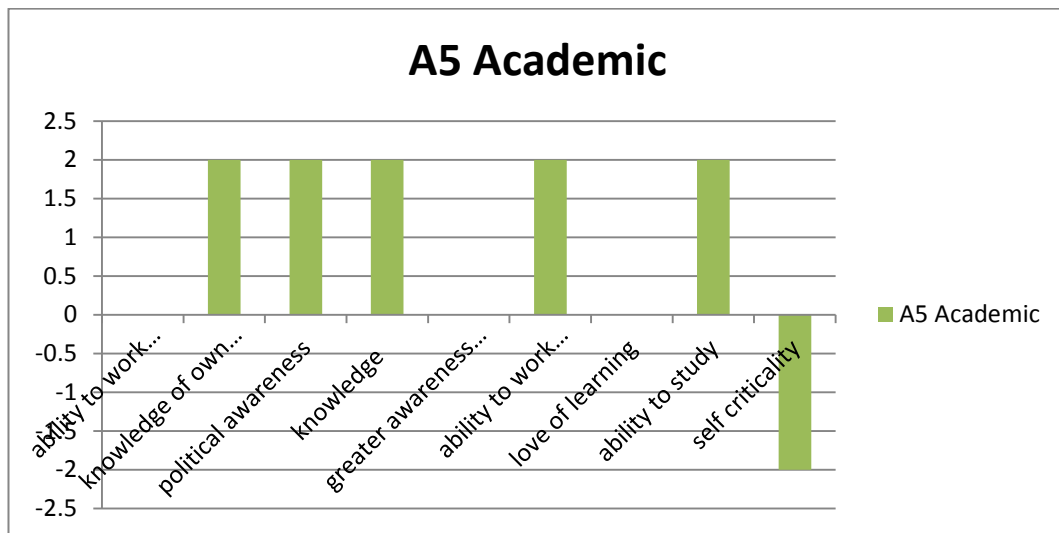
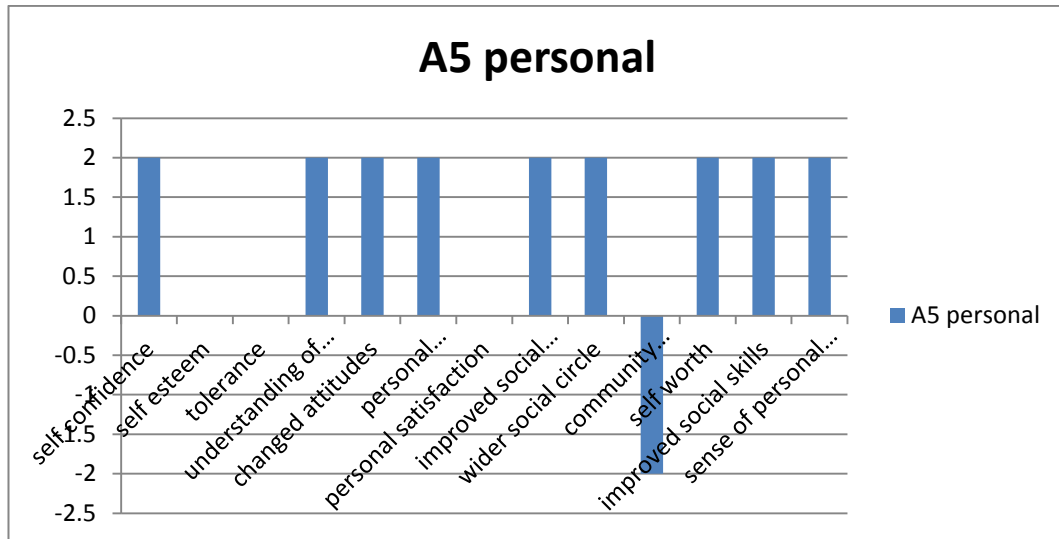
## A5

A5 was a white British male graduate who left school at 16 and started work whilst taking A-levels at evening classes. At 21 he began his undergraduate degree in a pure science field at a post '92 university. Financial pressures and disengagement with the course led him to leave, but a taste for university study led him to transfer his studies to a humanities course at a post '92 institution near his family home. He began a part time job whilst studying, and soon moved into student accommodation, graduating with a pass 16 years before interview. Whilst heavily involved with community work during his degree for the students' union, he saw this as personal development external to his degree. Employed at the time of interview although not in the direct area of his degree, he considered the academic aspect of his degree had been strong as reflected in his SRM and questionnaire despite an academic failure in his final year. A5's evaluation of development value aligns with his perceptions of value despite a negative experience he reported with his final dissertation and how he felt this failure to award him an honours degree had adversely altered his career potential. In interview he attributed his value perception despite the issues of disappointment to the recognition of value in inspirational, supportive lecturers.



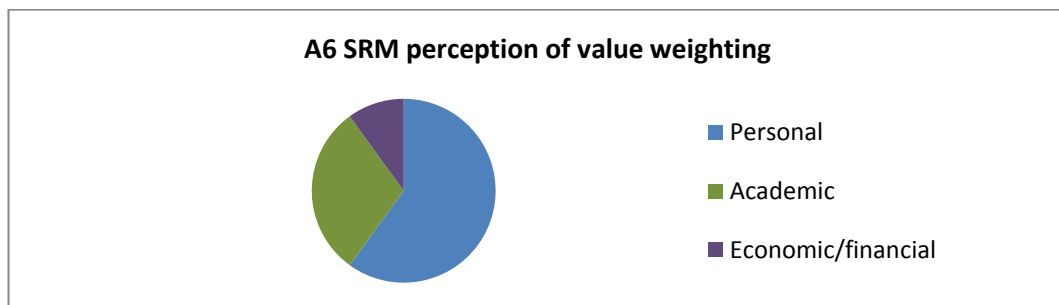
Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	30	1.23
Academic	50	0.88
Economic/financial	20	0.88



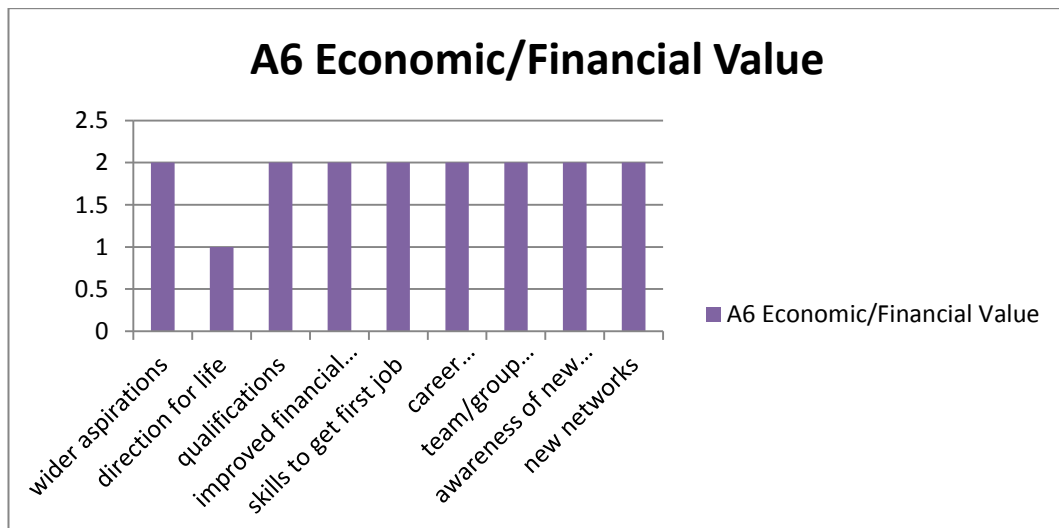
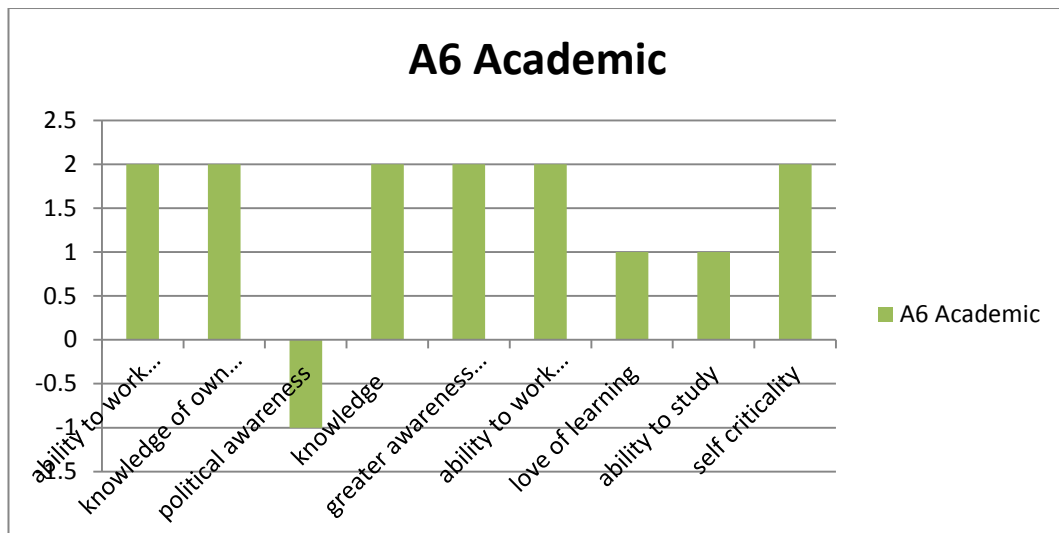
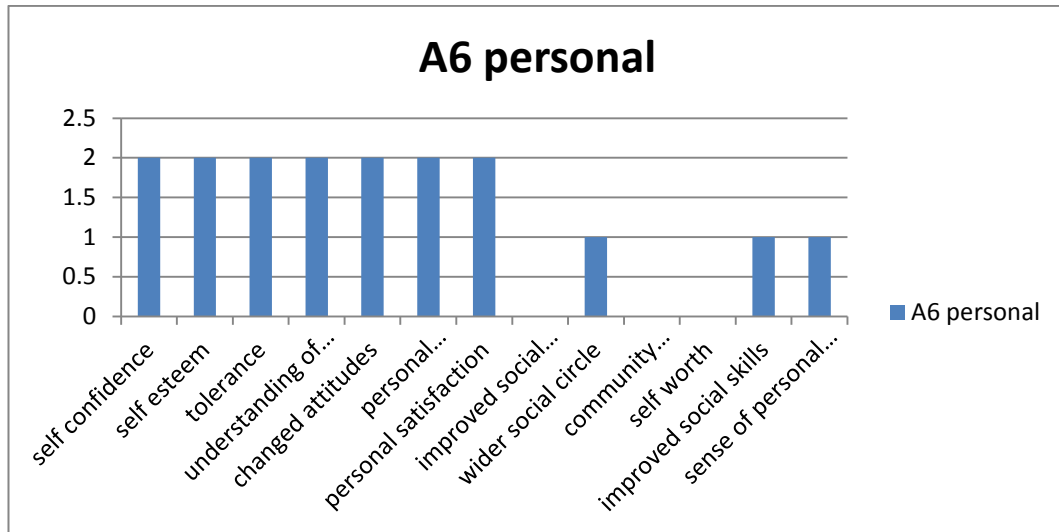


## A6

A6 was an eastern European student attracted to UK higher education by an active outreach programme and distance from home and the belief the UK was less demanding of students in time commitment terms. This she considered would enable her to work part-time to earn money to fund travelling. This also influenced her choice of institution too, to select one near an airport with low cost airlines where, after finishing her state education at the age of 19 she began a business-related degree at a post-92 institution in England. Her mother (a former graduate in her own country), and father supported her degree aspirations but expressed concerned about her desire to study far away. A6 graduated with First Class Honours two years before interview having worked throughout her degree, undertaken a placement year within the university where she was studying, and then completed a Masters at a Russell Group institution. She considered the academic aspect of her degree neither an anticipated nor perceived strength but an expected one. The questionnaire showed A6 identified economic/financial development as the highest aspect of her experience despite identifying this area as very low in the SRM. Within the SRM the highest value attributed was personal, perhaps influenced by the significant personal and cultural aspects of her experience.

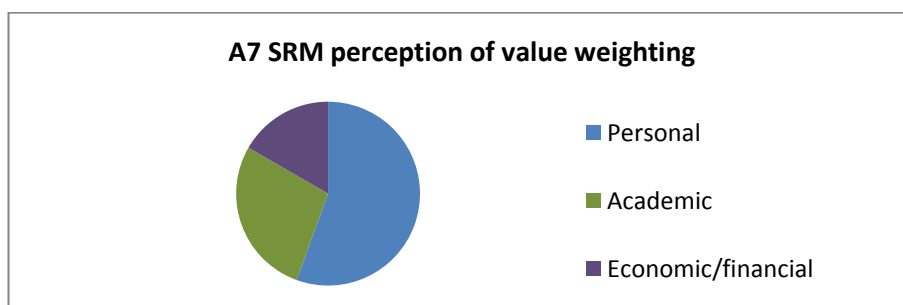


Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	60	1.30
Academic	30	1.44
Economic/financial	10	1.88

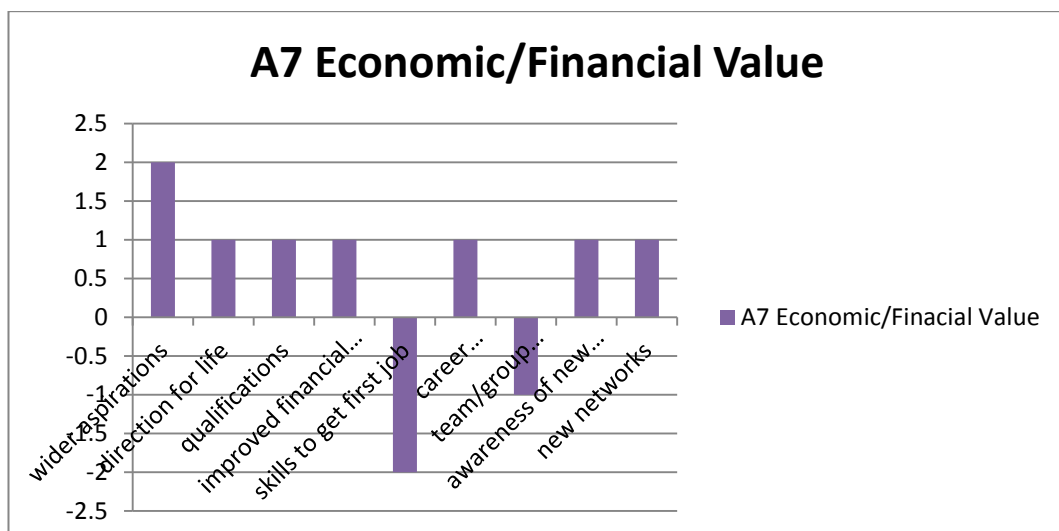
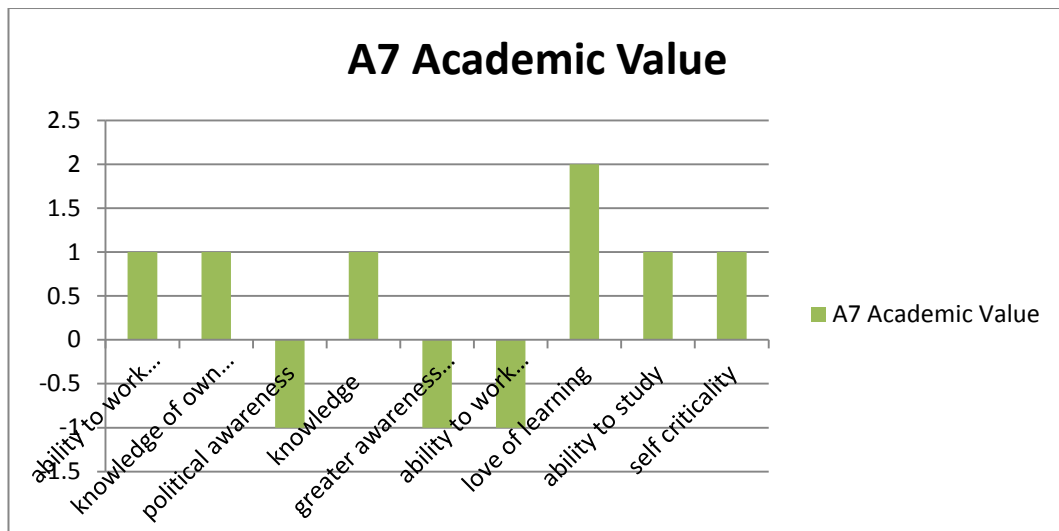
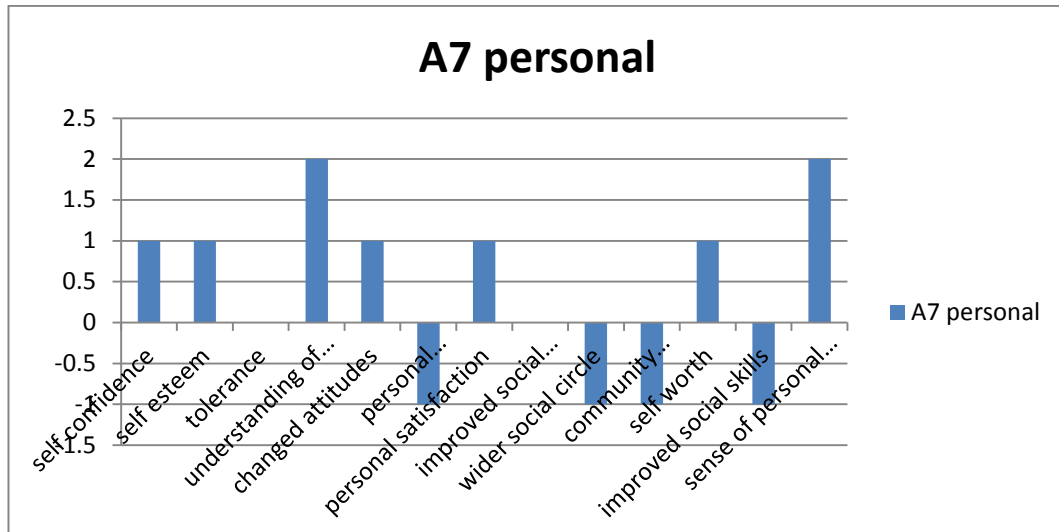


## A7

Recognition of and direct application to practical employment of her degree was essential to A7's experience and subsequent value allocation. She left school after GCEs to go into her chosen career of nursing. First in her family to HE, she was proud to have changed her parents' attitudes towards female education as a result of her achievement. Her higher education experience stemmed from the move to credentialise nursing as a degree profession. Her professional experience and nursing qualifications were accepted as accreditation of prior learning enabling her to complete a single top-up year for her related degree. Supported financially by a full National Health Service bursary, she graduated aged 40 with a 2:1 five years prior to interview. She anticipated and sought strong personal and academic value in the experience. At the time of interview she was continuing with further M-level study, actively encouraging both her sons towards HE, and promoting a degree's personal value to nursing colleagues. A7 considered overall economic/financial development value higher than academic and saw personal development as low on the selected criteria. This stemmed from her belief that as a mature student her personal development as a mother, wife and nurse was already established. Within the questionnaire she identified independence, social confidence and social skills as already possessed. Tolerance and group working she felt had been developed within her nursing, and she had no desire to seek additional social circles or community involvement through her degree. However in SRM value terms her personal value attribution of value far outweighed all other aspects and the economic was significantly the lowest perhaps because it was already established.

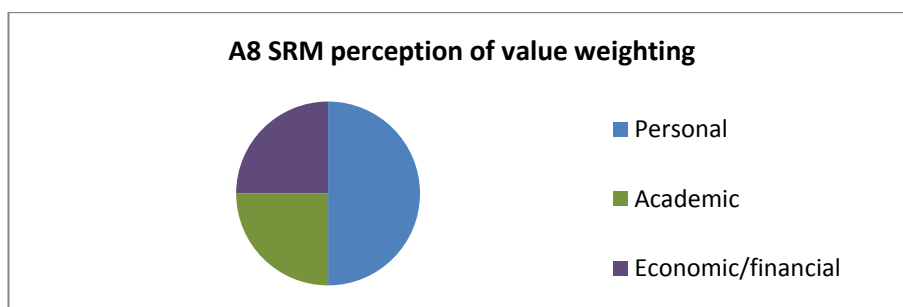


Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	50	0.23
Academic	25	0.44
Economic/financial	15	0.55

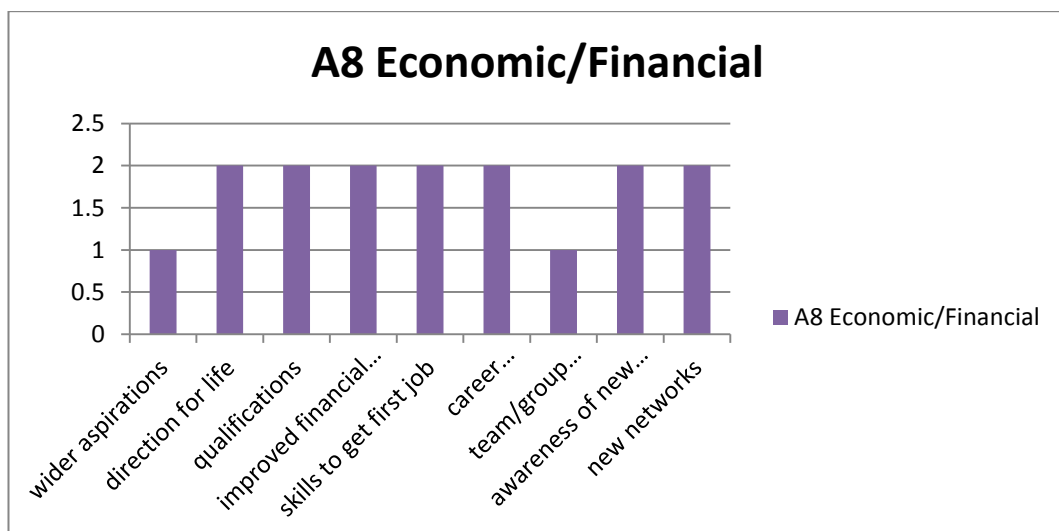
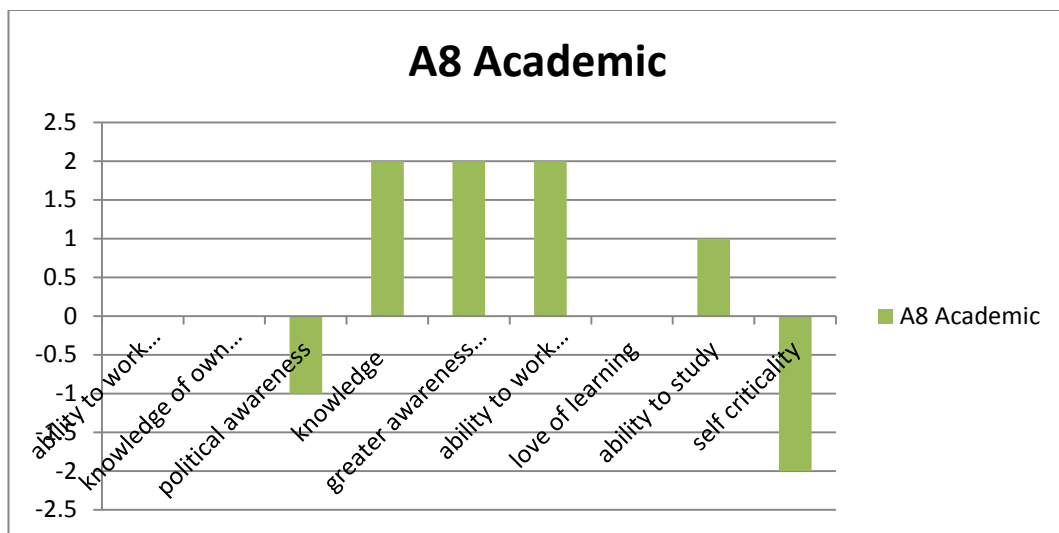
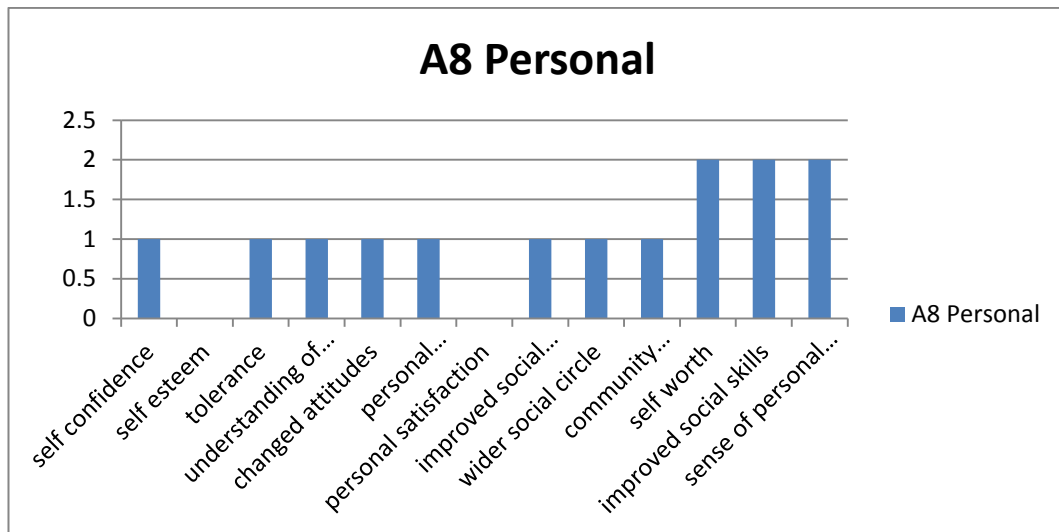


## A8

A8 was a white British female general practitioner who had dreamed of becoming a doctor since the age of ten. This graduate of a Russell Group institution entered HE from a state school on a full academic grant fulfilling the expectations of her graduate single-parent mother. Interviewed 28 years after graduation with her MRCS (Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons) her allocation of value in her degree was focused on the personal, as clearly reflected in her SRM.



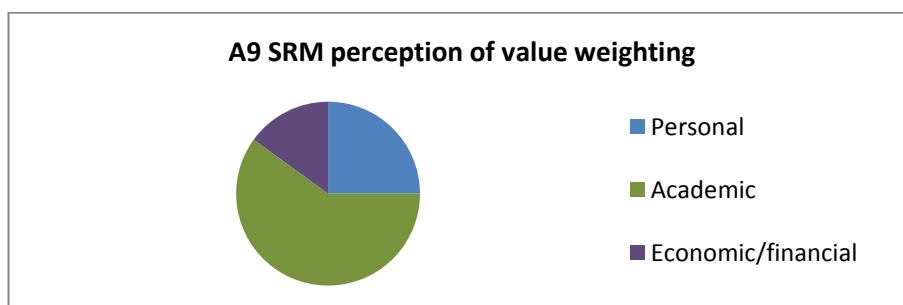
Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	50	1.07
Academic	25	0.66
Economic/financial	25	1.77



## A9

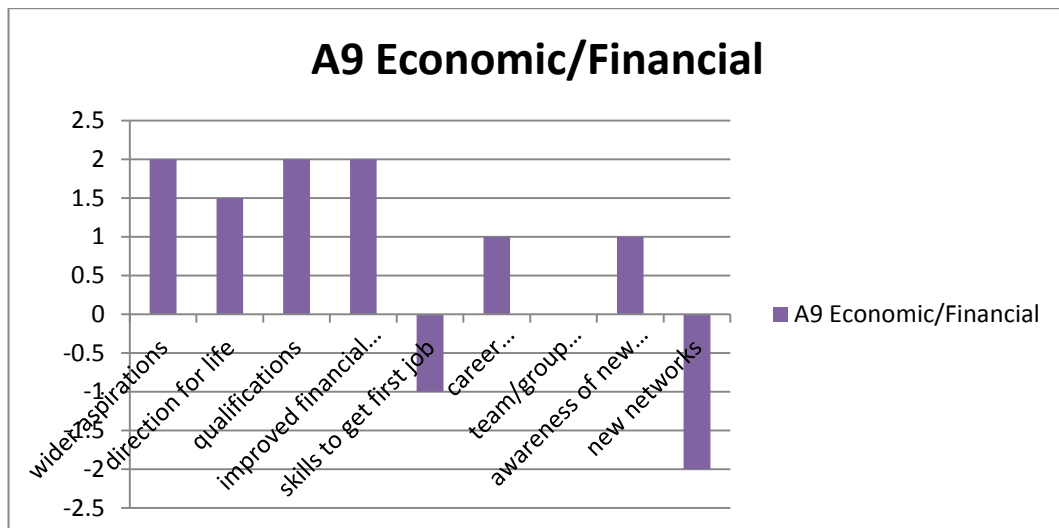
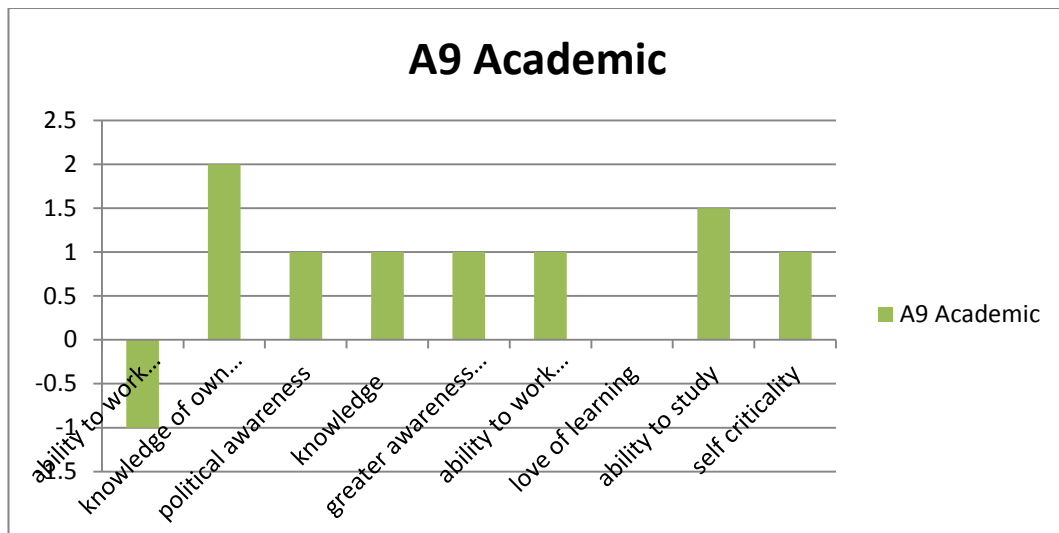
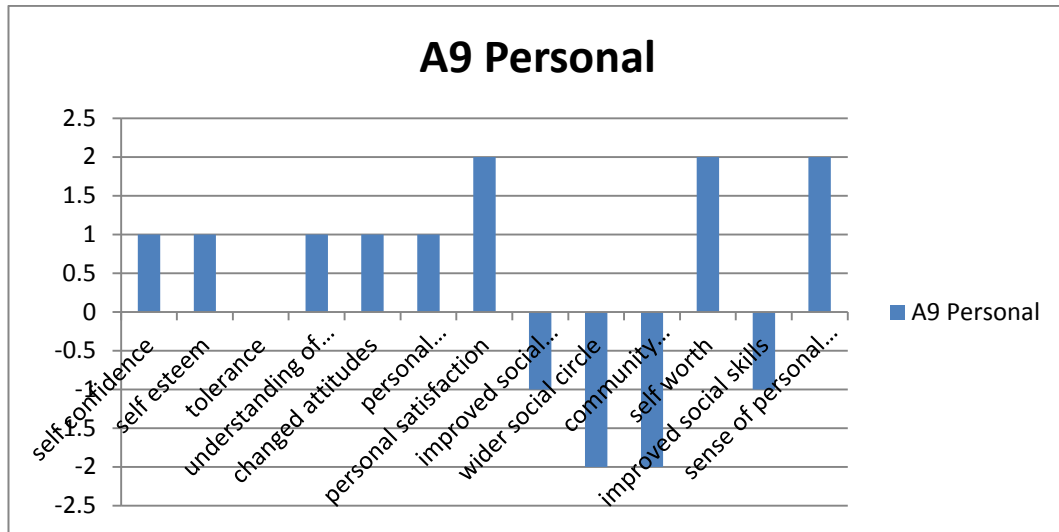
A9 reflected the increasing intake of non-traditional entrants to higher education among post '92 institutions. A white British father of a young child, he had been working since he left school at 16, coming to higher education aged 28 as a part-time, evening-study student on a degree which included a foundation year. The first in his family to study in higher education, he considered his final perception of his degree experience and thus its value to him had been adversely coloured by learning just before graduation that only a few marks had separated his final classification of a 2:1 and a First Class Honours. By the time of interview, nine years after his graduation, he was in a career which required degree qualifications and this academic imperative was reflected in his value attribution in his SRM, interview and in development value through the questionnaire.

The personal value in achieving something he had thought impossible and the intrinsic instrumentality and self-efficacy this had created was evident in all his responses. He had continued to postgraduate study and become an ambassador in encouraging degree aspirations for all with aptitude for academic study. A9 clearly identified academic development and academic value as the highest elements in his estimation. His responses across the interview, questionnaire and SRM make apparent the capacity for mobility in economic terms to go down whilst not reducing overall value or satisfaction. He saw his economic/financial development as high but the SRM value in this area was lowest because his change of career enabled by his degree took him from a high-earning role to a lower-earning although to a more personally satisfying career, something which he identified as increased value in terms of personal and symbolic capital.



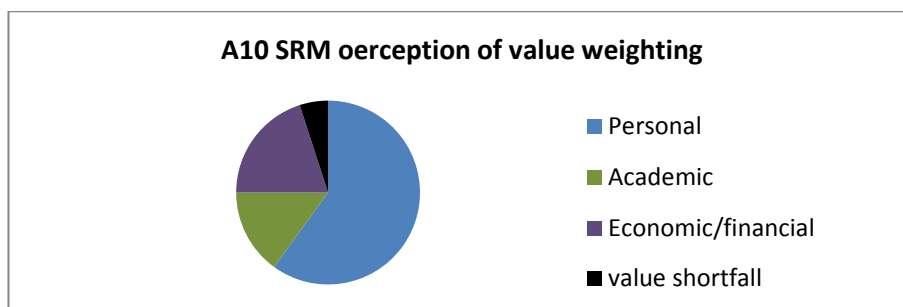
Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	25	0.38
Academic	60	0.83
Economic/financial	15	0.61





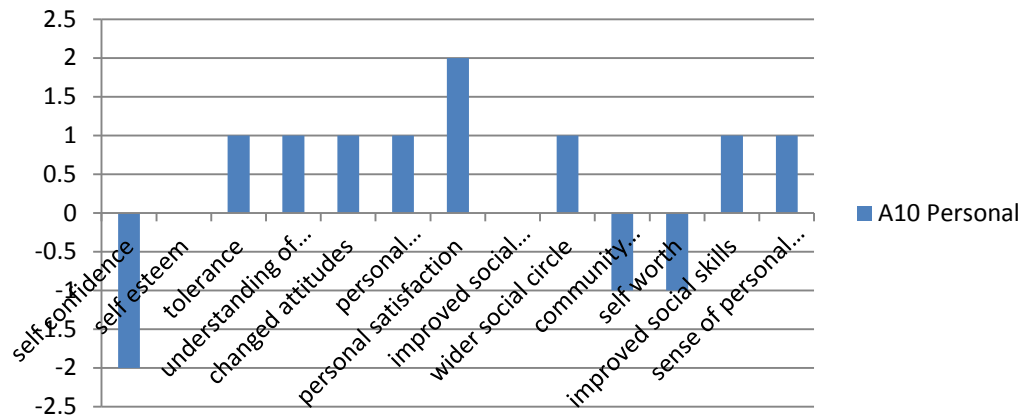
## A10

A British Eurasian male A10 was aware from an early age of 'significant' family pressure to achieve a degree. This was perceived as a career essential by his parents, and required him to be the first in the family to HE. Entering a Russell Group institution from a state school his responses require comparison with others making similar transitions to explore whether this is the journey of a research outlier or indicative of a wider pattern. He attributed negative perceptions of value to elements of his degree experience. In interview and in the questionnaire he highlighted negative impacts on his sense of self-worth, self-confidence and academic engagement brought about by a sense of inequality with his peers, encountering other, brighter individuals and disinterested lecturers. These, combined with his evaluation of his 2:2 degree classification as a disappointment and the cause of him not achieving the high-earning job which had been the expectation of a degree, to negative value being recorded within his SRM. He graduated four years prior to interview. A10's views appear to differ from other interviewees and for this reason it will be important to evaluate the perceptions of Russell Group graduates to identify whether he is an outlier or indicative of more widely held perceptions. It was clear A10 lacked a sense of self-determination being under significant pressure in parental, academic terms and indeed social terms pre and during his degree. Having to work was also a significant factor that left him feeling excluded and reduced his capacity to achieve full potential value from his experience. A10 has continued study with another undergraduate qualification in a different subject within a different HE environment (HE in FE) and views this, something he elected personally and to support a new career path as highly valuable.

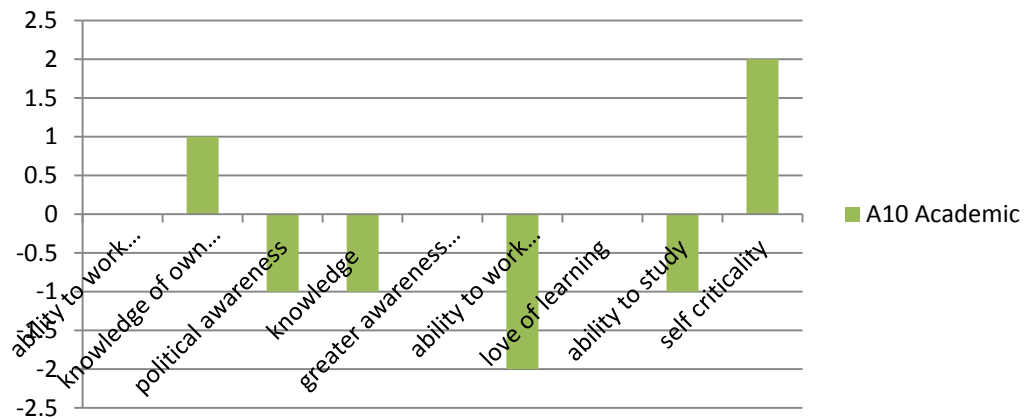


Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	60	0.30
Academic	15	0.22
Economic/financial	-5	0.33

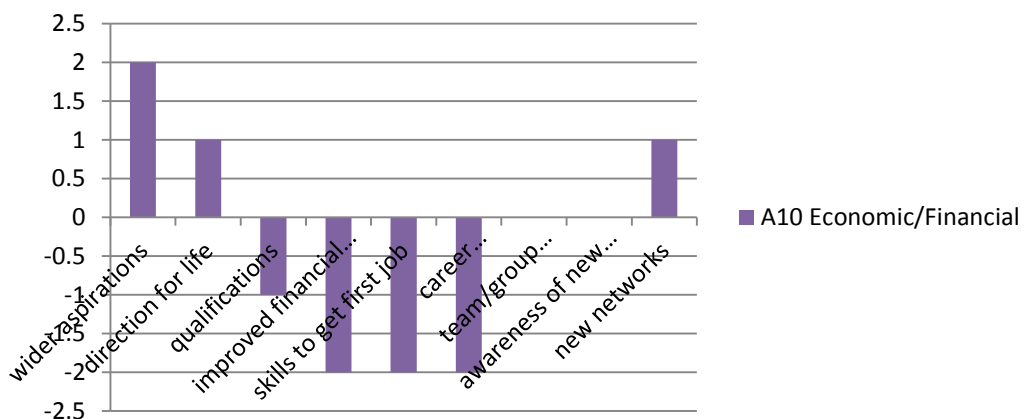
### A10 Personal



### A10 Academic

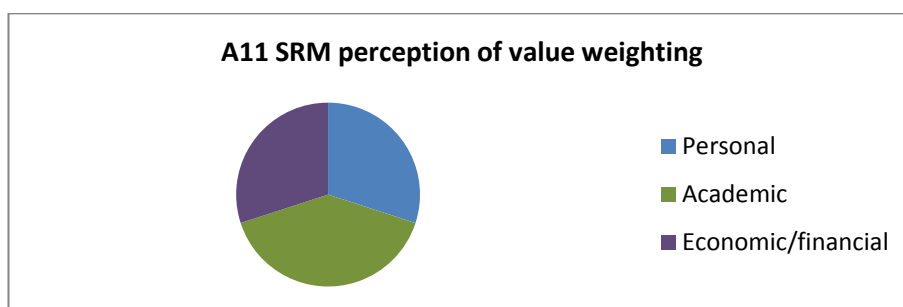


### A10 Economic/Financial

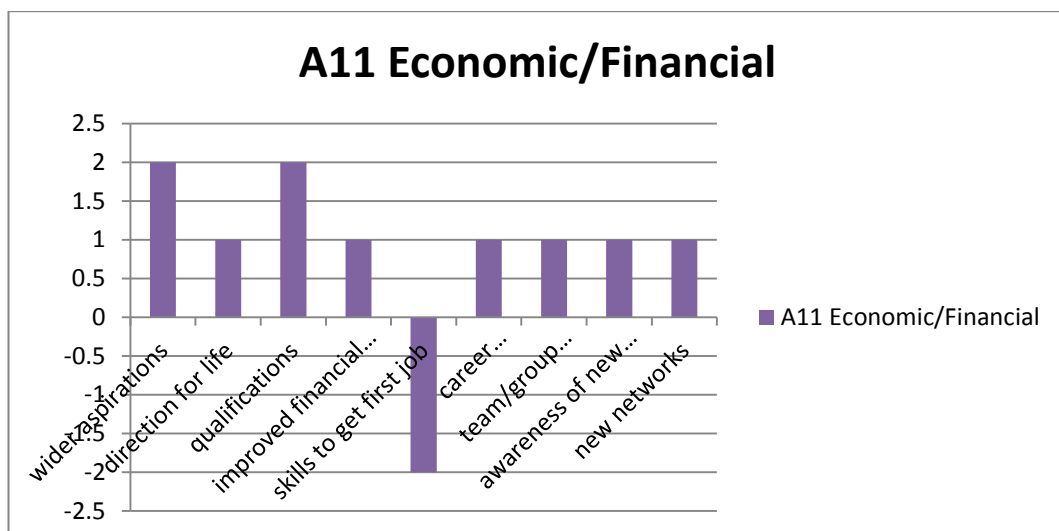
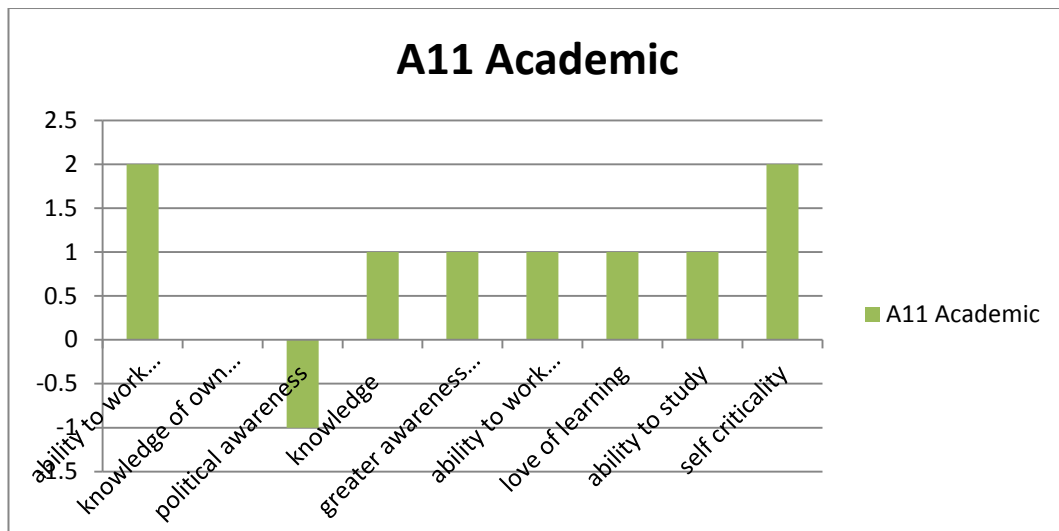
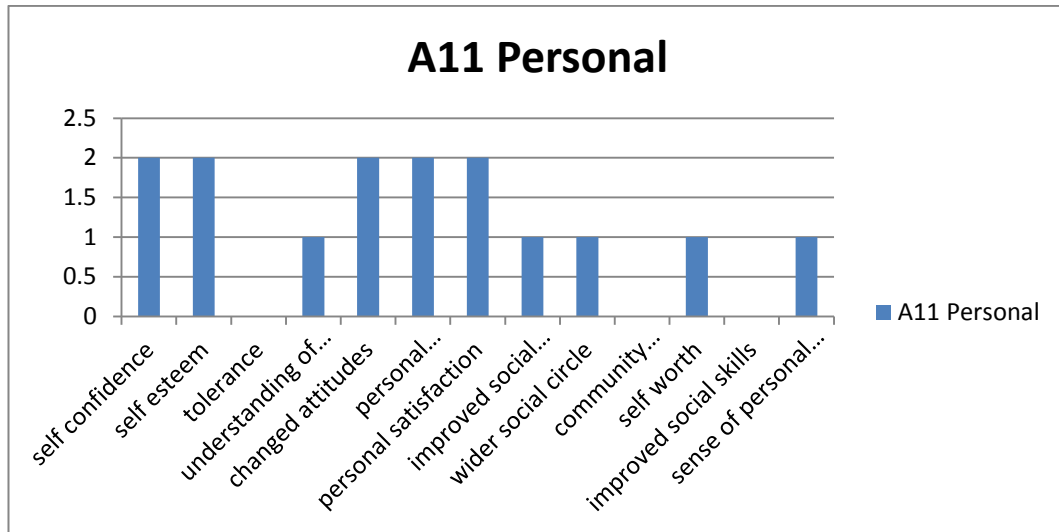


## A11

Working to earn whilst studying was considered a positive and valuable part of his degree experience for A11, a British Black African graduate who entered a post '92 institution higher education as a mature student of 25. Whilst determined to achieve a degree A11 was not prepared to give up the job which he had worked hard to secure. He managed full time work and full time study by working long hours to meet the requirements of both. His job was in an area connected to his degree which he considered added depth to his experience. He had graduated 17 years prior to interview with a 2:1 and maintained employment within his discipline area. Through the interview, SRM and questionnaire A11 identified the balance of personal, academic and economic value and the development in each of these areas to him from his degree as being closely aligned. This was perhaps because of the clear correlation he saw between the application of academic development and value to create economic/financial advantage and thus improve personal value. His belief in the importance of tertiary education has led him to actively consider further qualifications and he is an active advocate of higher education.

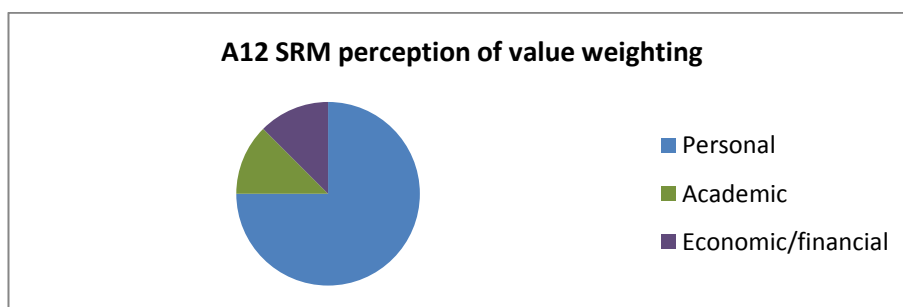


Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	30	1.07
Academic	40	1.00
Economic/financial	30	0.88

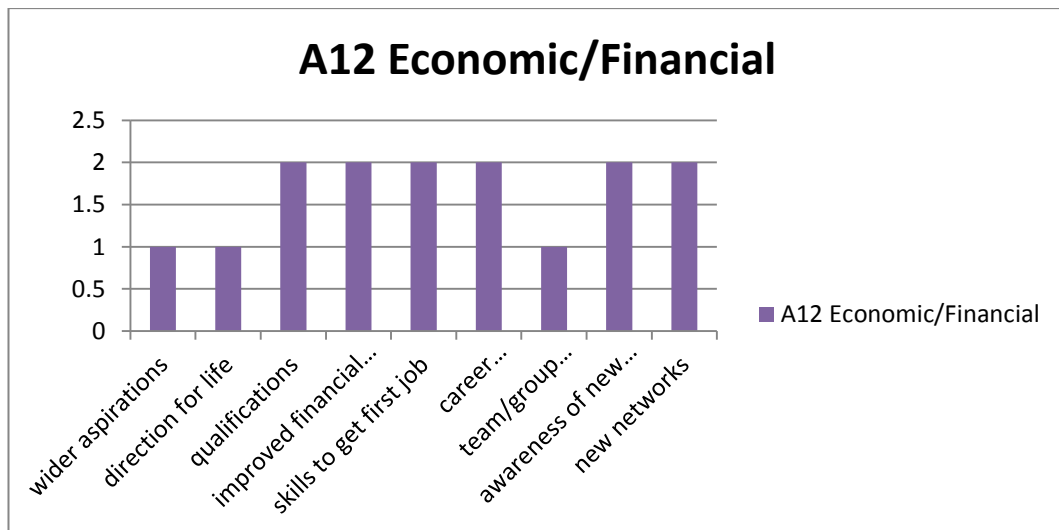
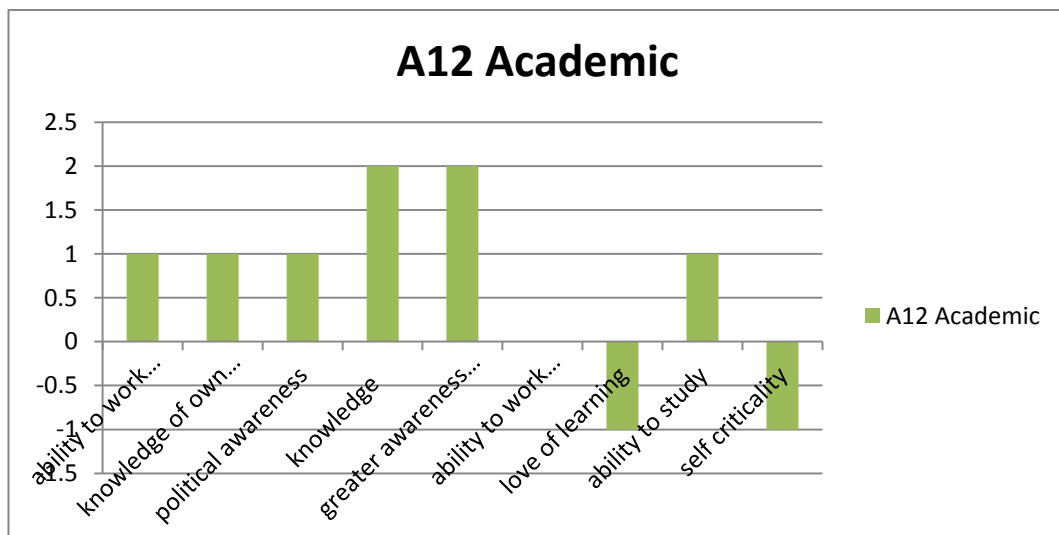
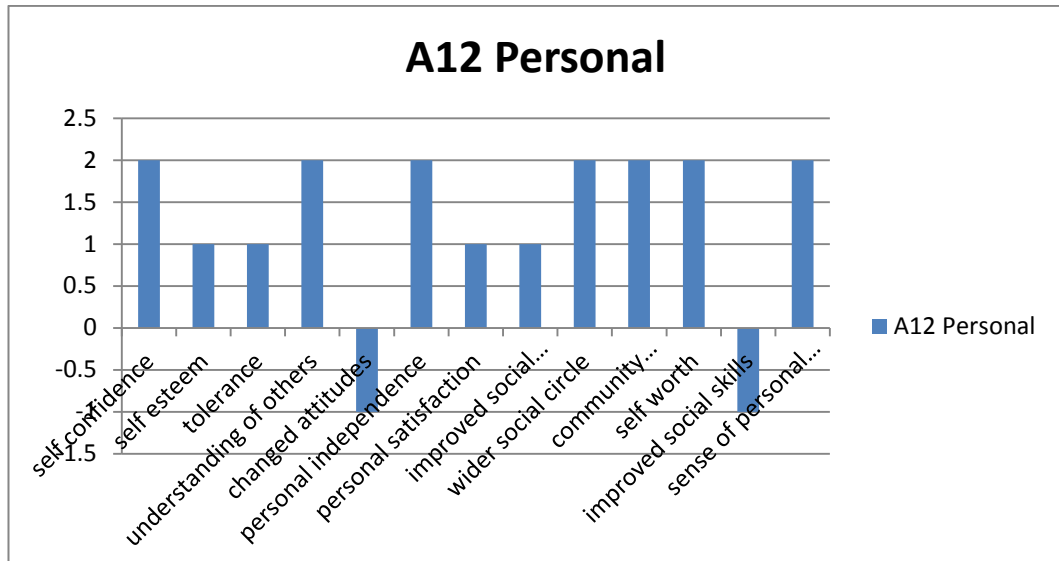


## A12

A12 was a white British female student who chose her humanities based course not for its relevance to her career, but as a subject area in which she had succeeded at her state school and in which she anticipated she could comfortably achieve a degree. The first in her family to achieve a degree, she graduated with a 2:1 from a pre-92 institution six years prior to interview. Her enthusiasm for the value she experienced in her degree led to her to continue working in the tertiary sector for students unions and HEIs. A12 had changed her career goal during her degree but felt this advantageous and adding to her sense of self-efficacy. She identified value in her degree giving her opportunities to explore new pathways of which she had been previously unaware. Through the interview and SRM her perception of value was unswervingly that the personal value was most significant and this was in part reflected through the value development allocation within the questionnaire. However her responses to the questionnaire clearly identified the recognition of economic/financial value development as a result of her degree as being the highest, and academic the lowest. In the interview she alluded to a lack of challenge in the academic work. She talked of writing assignments at the last minute and still passing well. However she also said she felt her 2:1 was an achievable academic target which enabled her to enjoy life and extra curricula activities.

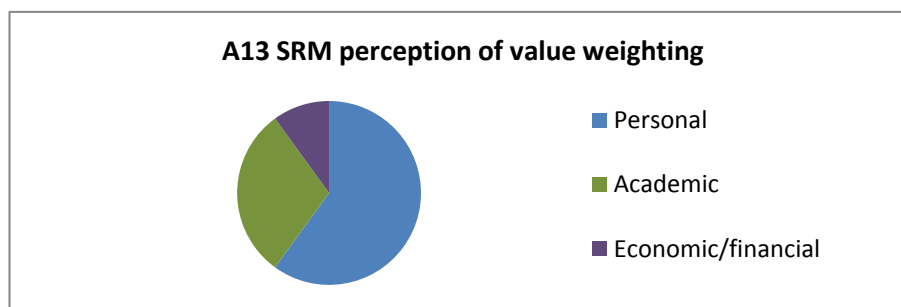


Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	75	1.23
Academic	12.5	0.14
Economic/financial	12.5	1.66



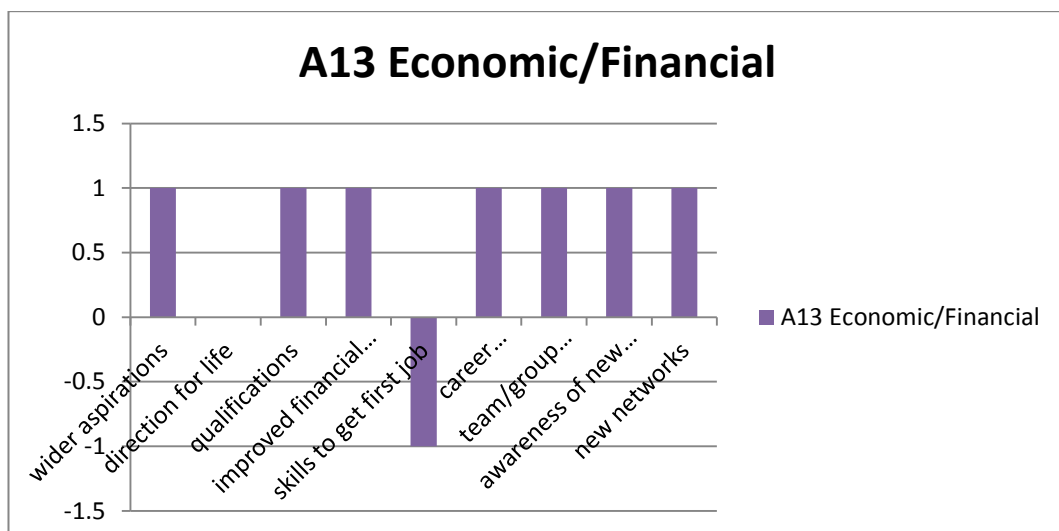
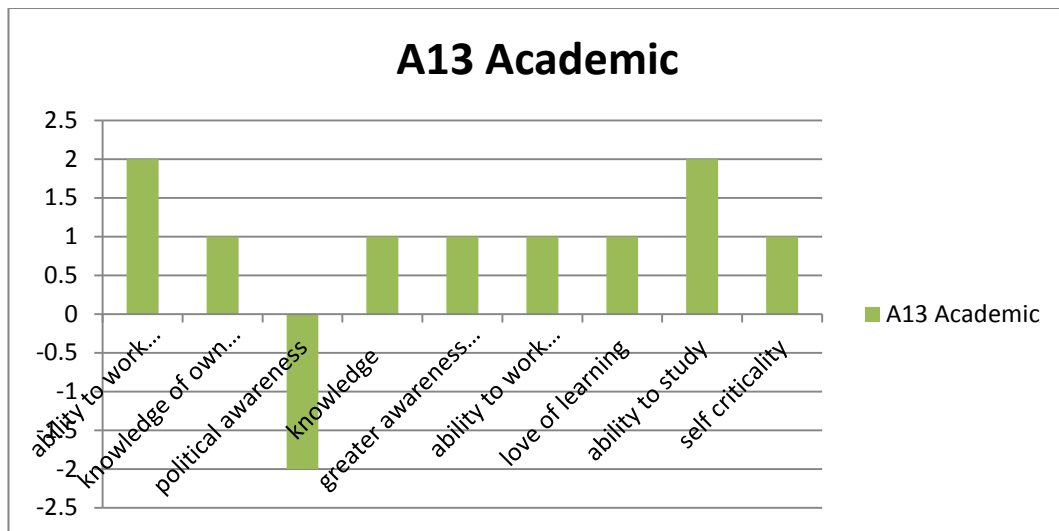
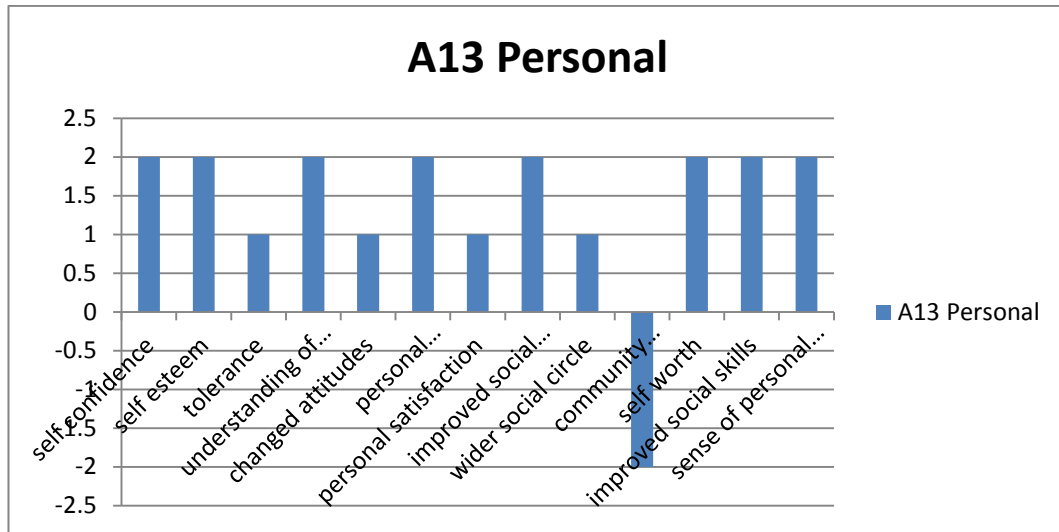
### A13

Perception of personal value significantly outweighed other values in the interview, SRM and questionnaire of A13, a white, British female graduate, A13. For her living away from home for her degree at a post '92 institution was the most important aspect of value development. Entering at 18 from a state school, she was the first in her family to complete a degree – her mother having previously dropped out of university during her first year. Interviewed four years after graduation when working in an area unrelated to her degree, A13 expressed regret that she felt unable to attribute higher value to her academic experience. She considered this the result of rote teaching, combined with a lack of self-engagement which led her to adopt a strategic learning approach. She blamed this on working part-time to earn money to enjoy 'London life' and the additional the 'distraction' of a boyfriend outside HE.



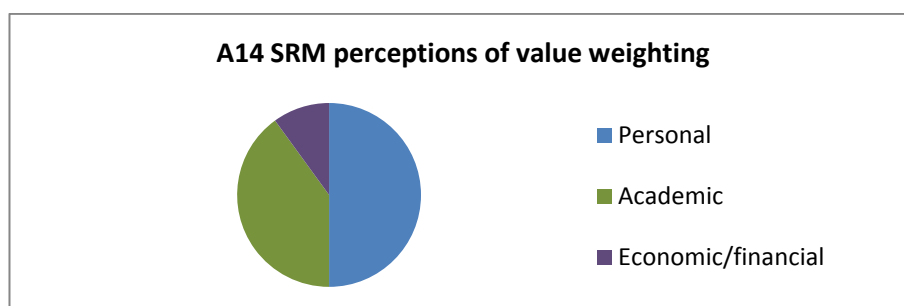
Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	60	1.38
Academic	30	0.13
Economic/financial	10	1.33



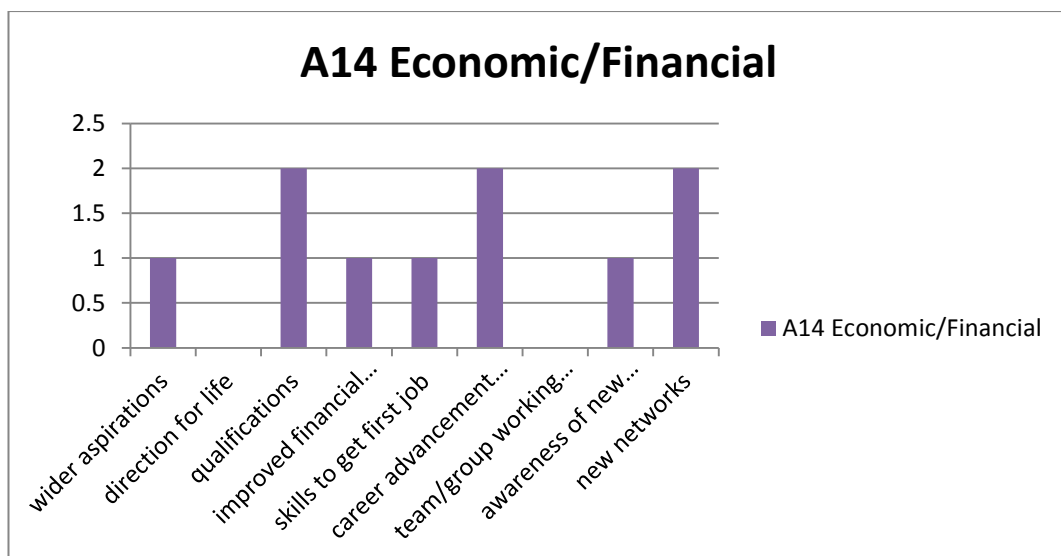
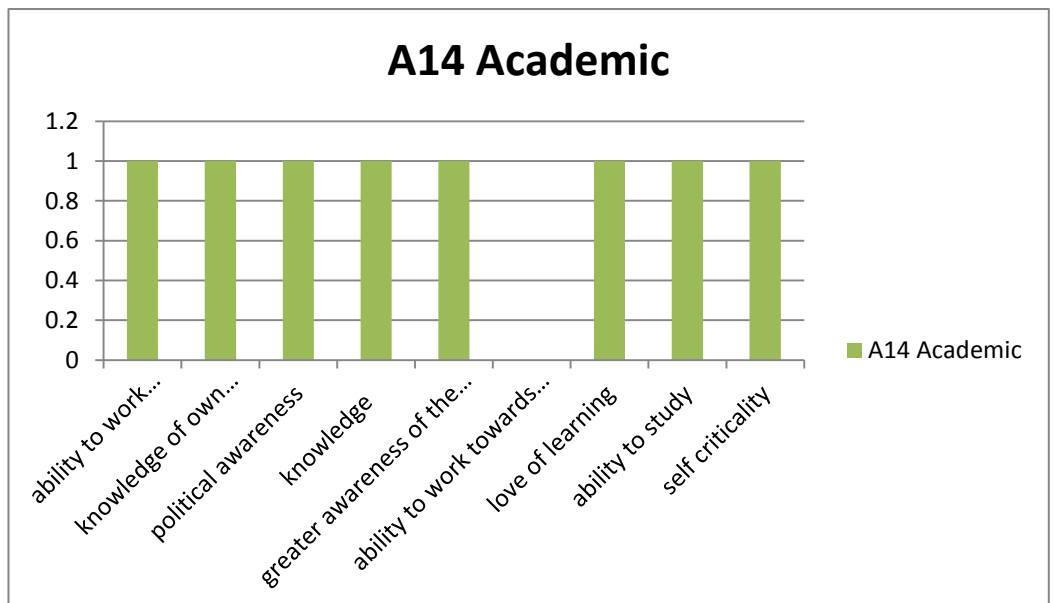
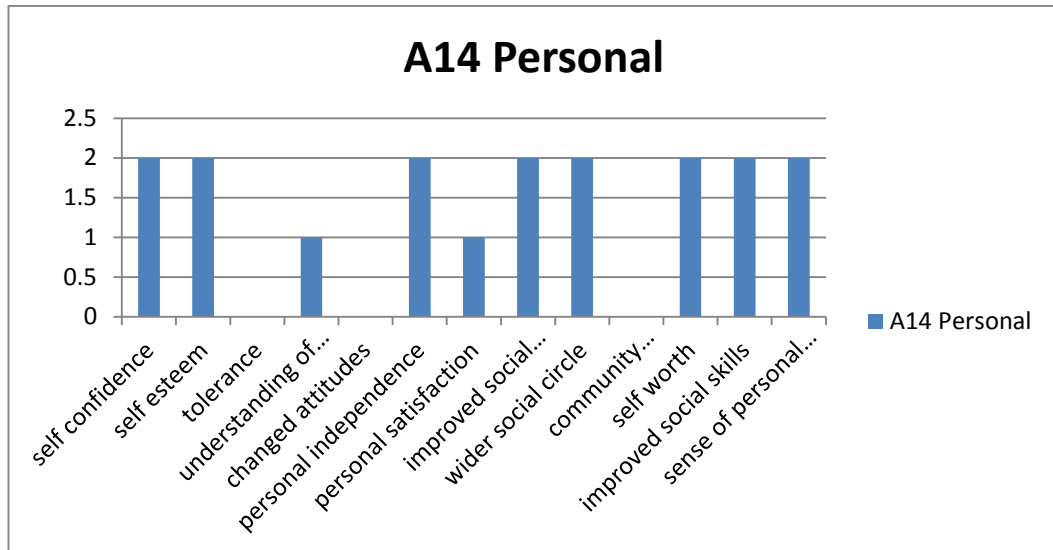


#### A14

Distance from home was seen by A14, a white male graduate of a pre '92 institution as a key motivation for being the first in his family to go to university. Entering from a widening participation background straight from a grammar school he entered a humanities degree for its breadth and association with a subject he had performed well at and enjoyed at school. Graduating 21 years prior to interview with a 2:2 he was clear (interview and SRM) about his perception of overall value being personal. In interview and questionnaire his recognition of the academic development value of his experience was equally evident. His belief in the academic development value of a degree led him to undertake a postgraduate qualification and he was outspoken about recommending first degrees to develop individuals on a personal basis.

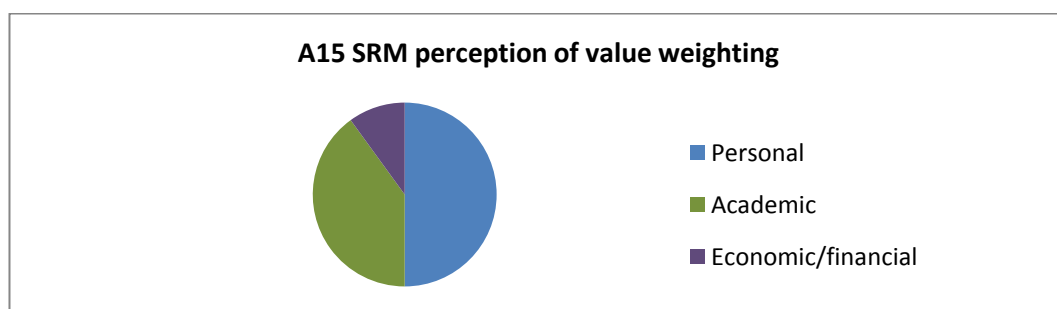


Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	50	1.38
Academic	40	1.77
Economic/financial	10	1.11

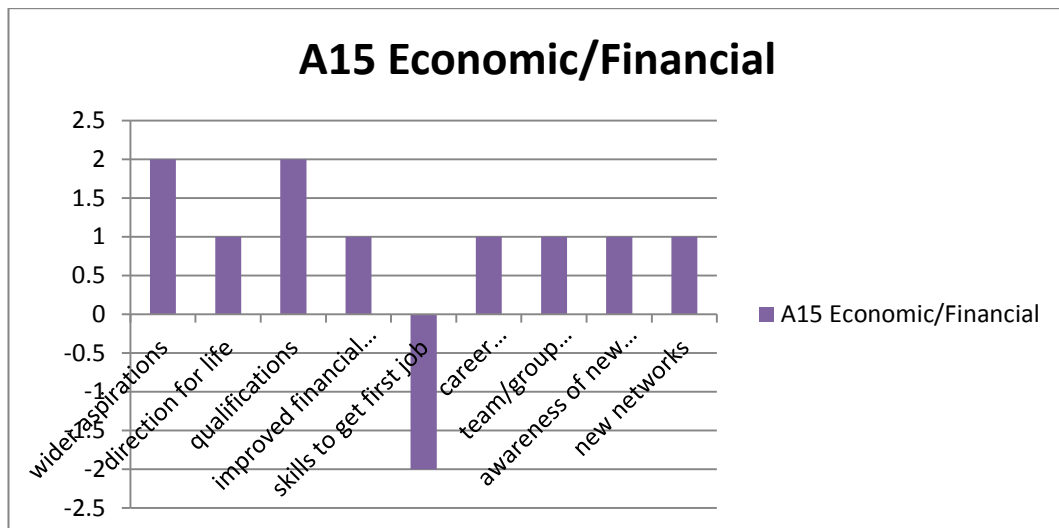
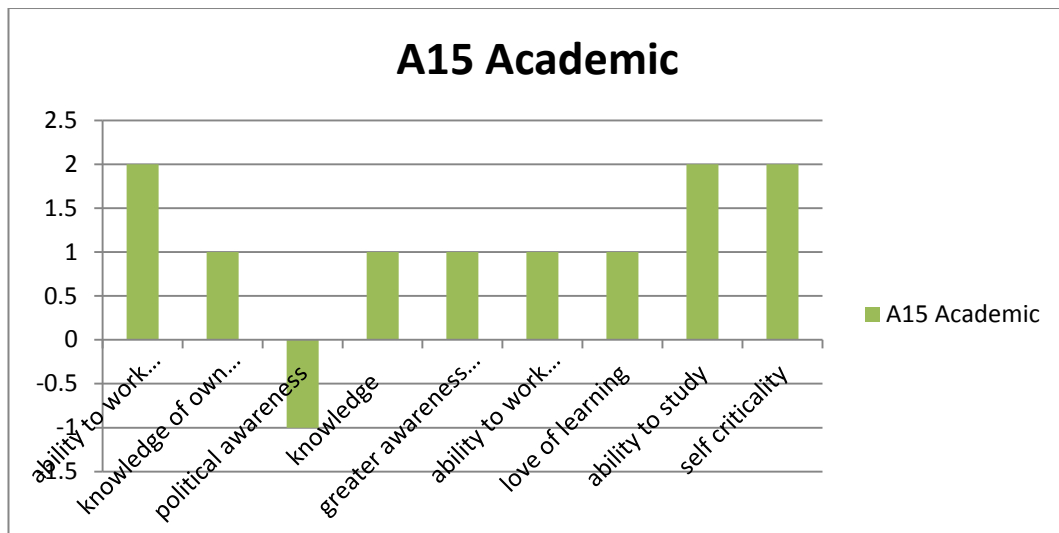
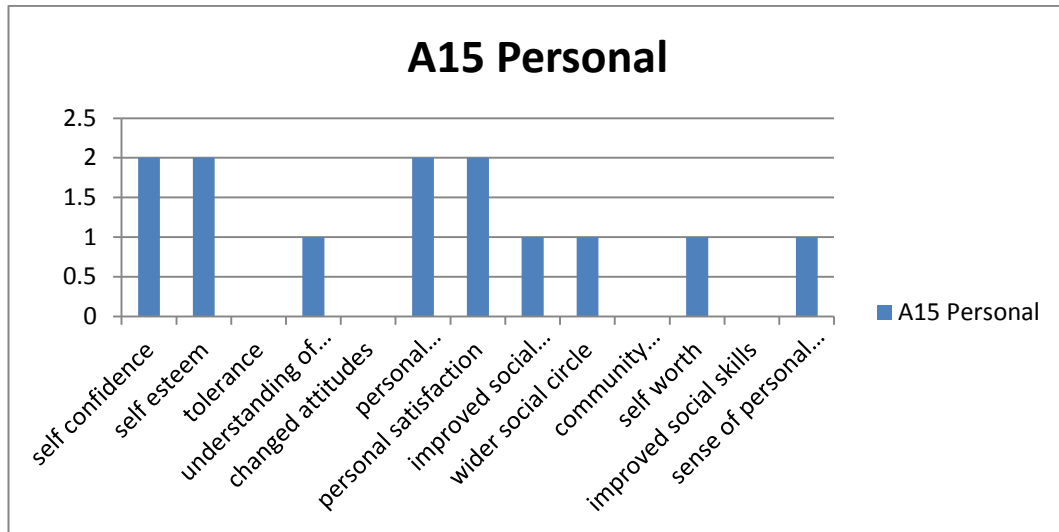


## A15

Career-applicability was the key purpose for A15, a white British male to undertake a degree. He entered what is now a post-92 institution but which was then a polytechnic with awarding powers from an associated university. Entering straight from school at 18 his degree experience spanned five years including as it did a placement year, a retake year, getting married and becoming a father. His brother had been the first generation to enter HE and he felt significant pressure from family, and a personal desire to live up to this example. As someone the furthest from his experience at the time of interview (33 years after graduation), he had been working continuously in the area of his degree since graduation. As an employer he sought employees with degrees and had encouraged his own children to undertake vocationally-relevant degrees at university because of his own experience. In interview, SRM and development value his responses clearly aligned.



Area of experience	Percentage value of experience weighting	Development means
Personal	50	1.46
Academic	40	1.11
Economic/financial	10	0.88



## Appendix 8 SRM allocation of specific values

Figs. a, b & c Specific allocation of value of graduates recording >50%

### PERSONAL value on SRM

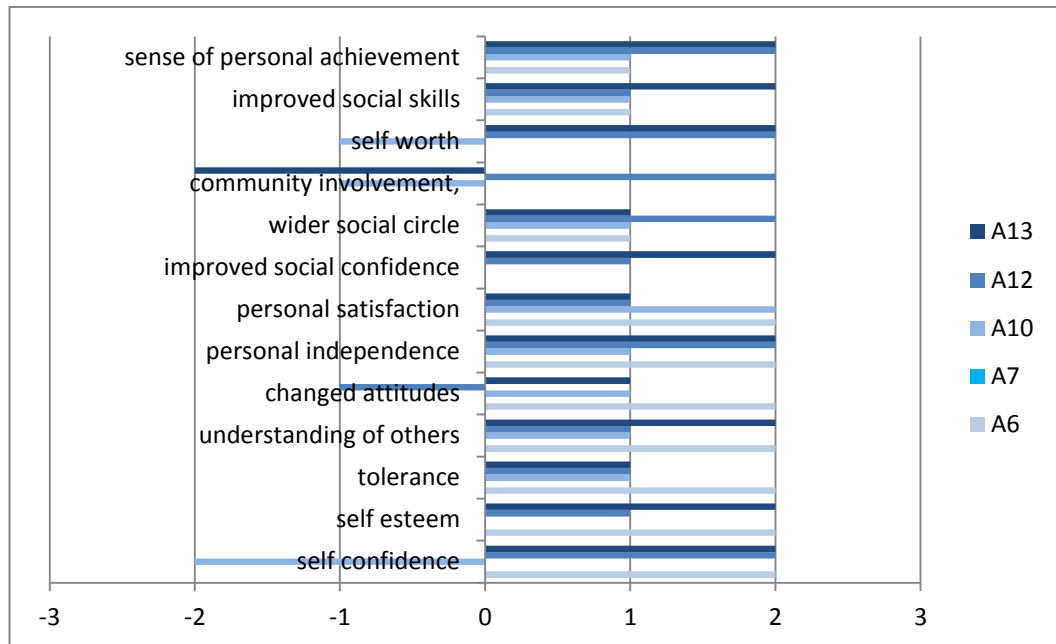
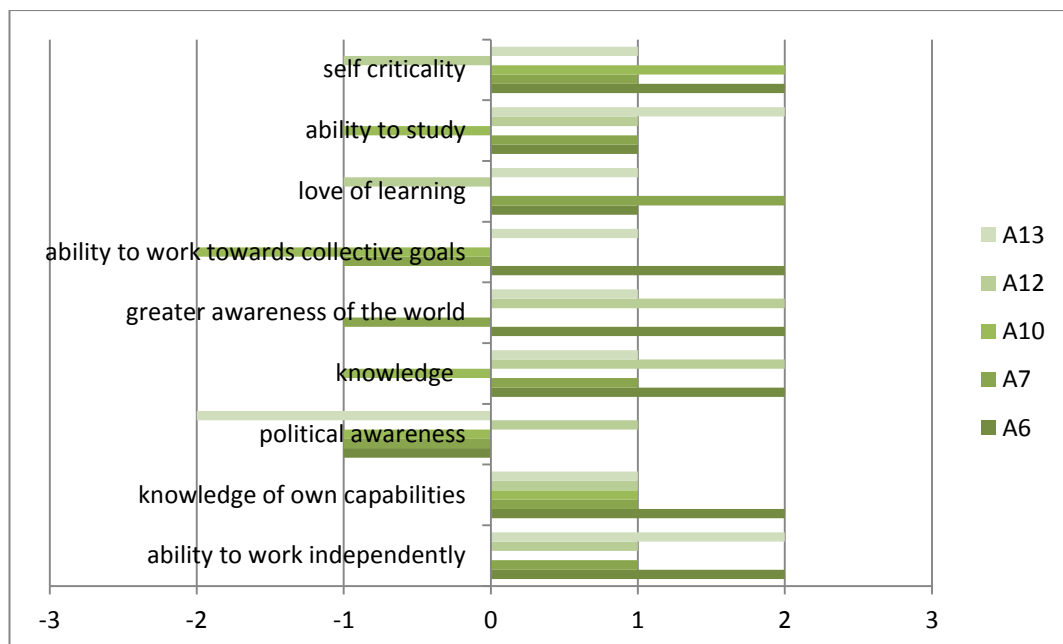


Fig. a. Personal development value among those recording >50% personal on SRM value allocation



Fig's. Academic (knowledge/skills) development value among those recording >50% personal on SRM value allocation

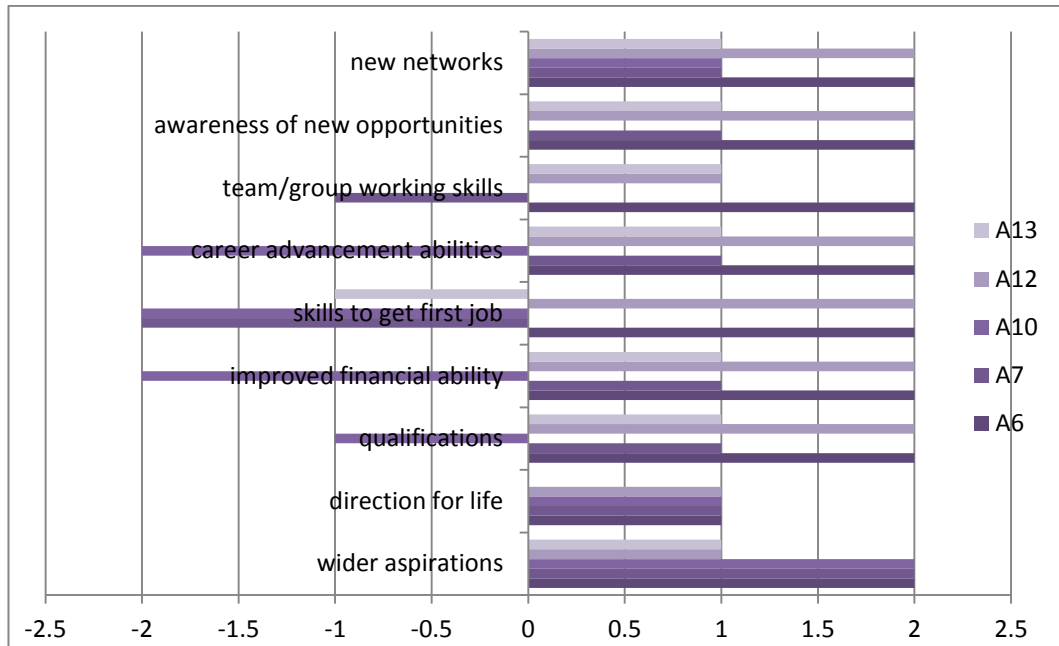


Fig.c. Economic/financial development value among those recording >50% personal on SRM value allocation

**Figs. d, e & f Specific allocation of value of graduates recording >50% ACADEMIC value on SRM**

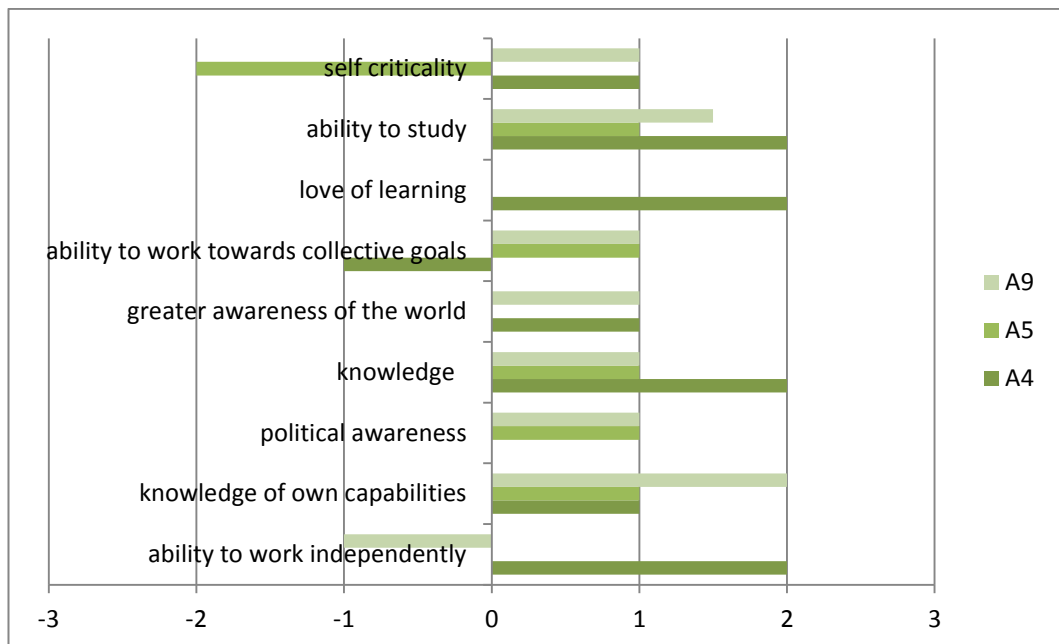


Fig.d. Academic (knowledge/skills) development value among those recording >50% academic on SRM value allocation

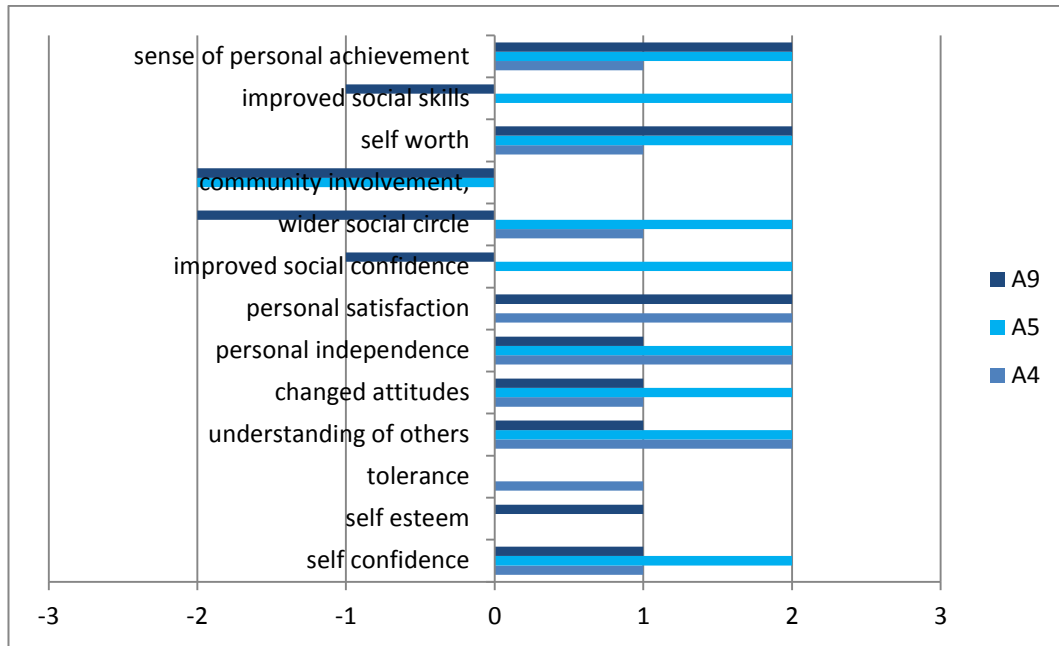


Fig.e. Personal development value among those recording >50% ACADEMIC on SRM value allocation

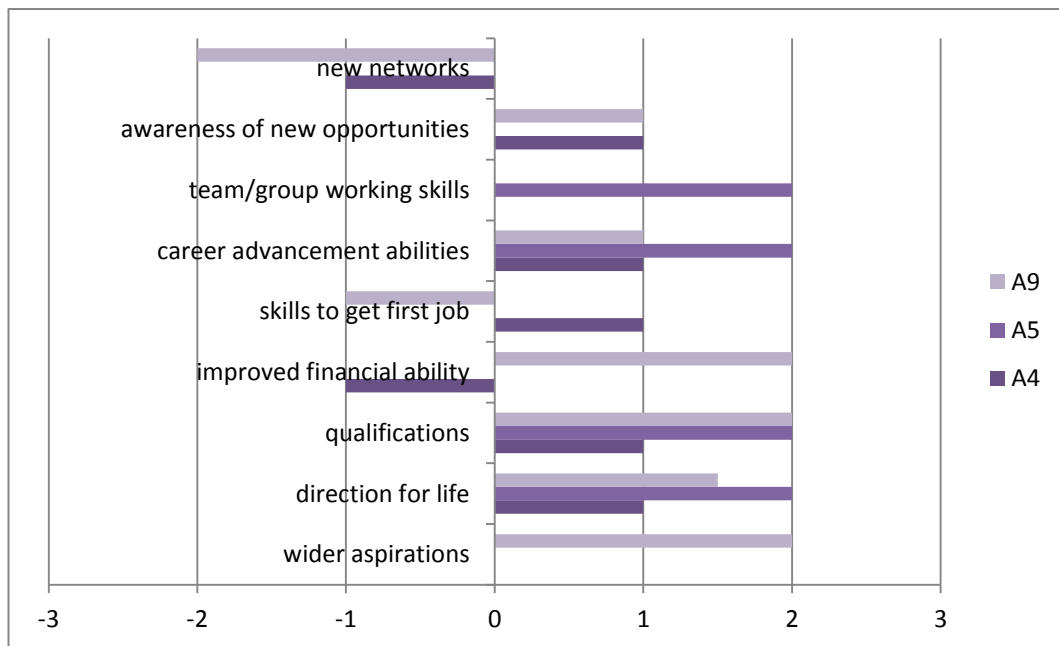


Fig.f. Economic/financial development value among those recording >50% ACADEMIC on SRM value allocation

**Figs g, h & i Specific allocation of value of graduates recording EVEN value distribution across the SRM**



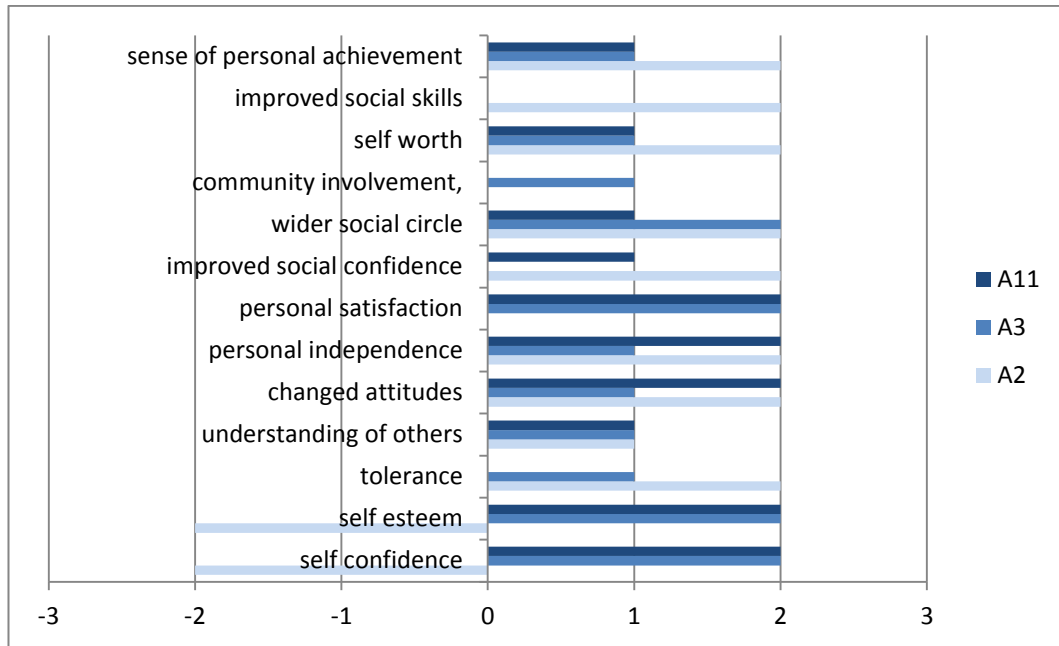


Fig. g. Personal development value among relatively equal SRM value allocators

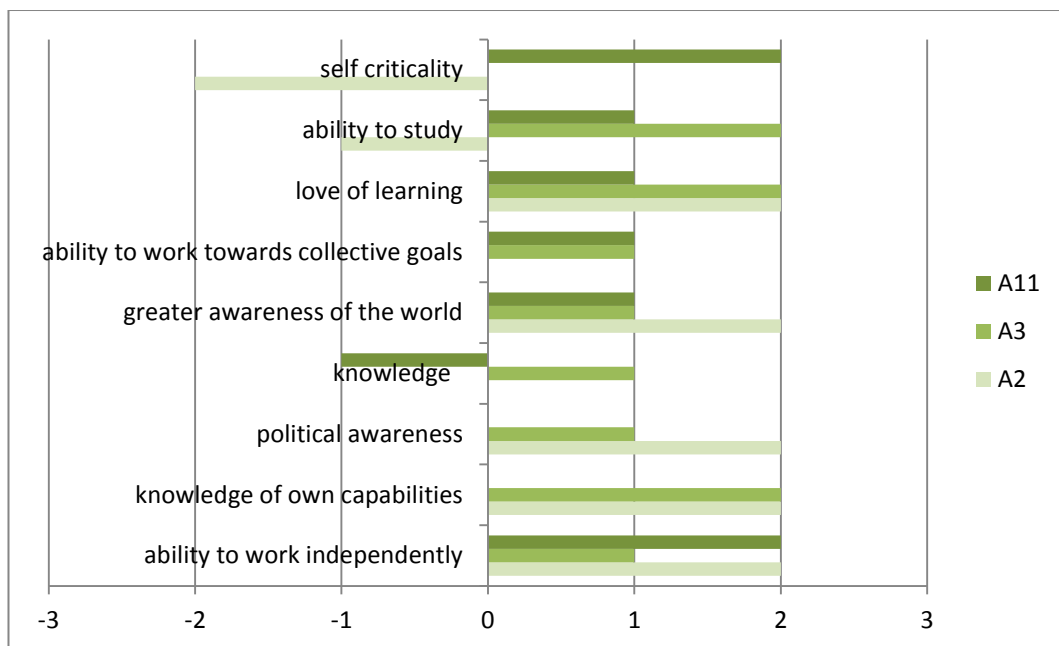


Fig.h. Academic (Knowledge/skills) development value among relatively equal SRM value allocators

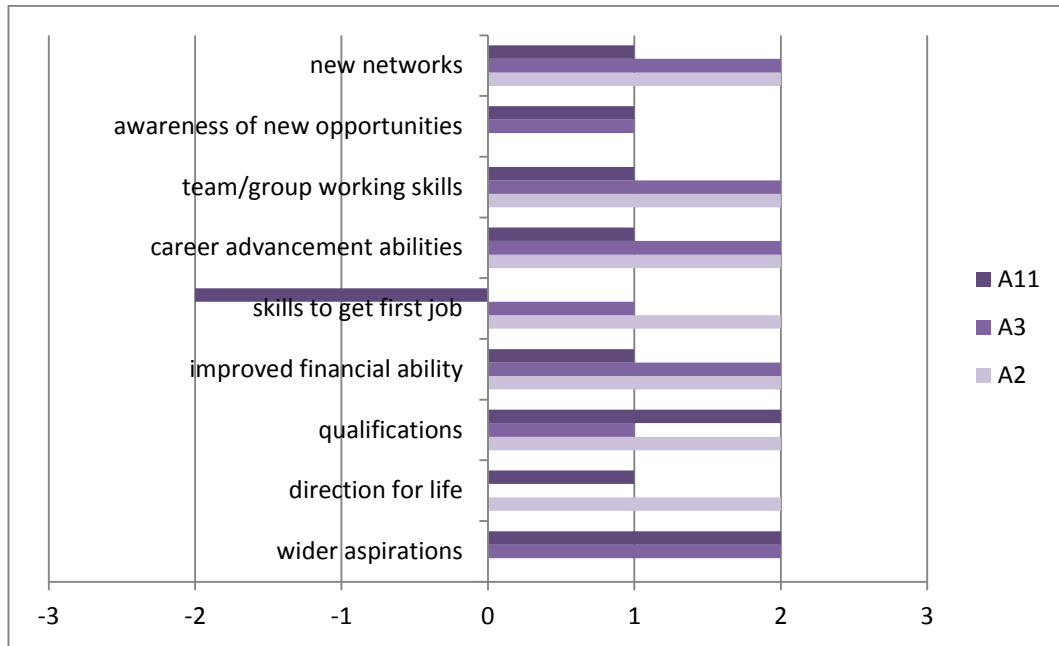


Fig.i. Economic/financial development value among relatively equal SRM value allocators

## Appendix 9 Participant demographics

Phase 1 interviews n=15

All percentages rounded to nearest decimal point

Gender	n=	%
Male	9	60
female	6	40
First generation in HE	n=	%
Yes	8	54
No	7	46
Ethnicity (classifications from participants)	n=	%
White British	11	72
British Indian	1	7
Black British Ghanaian	1	7
Eurasian British	1	7
White European	1	7
Degree essential for chosen/existing career path	n=	%
Yes	5	33
No	10	13
Study mode	n=	%
Full time	13	87
Part time	2	13
Classification	n=	%
First class	2	13
Upper second 2:1	5	34
Lower second 2:2	3	20
Pass	3	20
MBBS	1	7
Don't remember	1	7
Age at entry	n=	%
17-18	6	40
19-20	4	26
21-24	1	7
25-30	3	20
31-40	1	7
Institution type	n=	%
Post '92	10.5	70
Pre '92	2.5	17
Russell Group	2	13
Previous education	n=	%
State secondary to A levels	11	72
State Grammar to A levels	2	14
State no A levels	2	14
Working whilst studying	n=	%
Yes	10	67
No	5	33
Year of graduation	n=	%
1979	1	7
1981	1	7
1984	1	7
1995	2	13
1997	2	13
2003	2	13
2006	1	7
2008	3	19
2010	1	7
2011	1	7
Subject (Biglan 1973:207)	n=	%
Hard pure (e.g. physical sciences, mathematics)	1	7
Hard applied (e.g. computer science, engineering)	3	21
Soft pure (e.g. sociology, history)	5	33
Soft applied (e.g. social work, law, education)	6	39

**PHASE 2 Survey n=328 participants of whom n=202 were graduates of English Universities. Detail given below relates to the 202 graduates of English universities.**  
All percentages rounded to nearest decimal point unless otherwise stated

<b>Gender</b>	<b>n=</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Age at entry</b>	<b>n=</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	71	35.2	17-18	93	46.5
Female	129	64.9	19-20	48	24.0
Not reported	2	1.0	21-24	19	9.5
			25-30	11	5.5
<b>First generation in HE</b>			31-40	19	9.5
Yes	109	54.0	41-50	7	3.5
No	92	45.6	51-60	3	1.5
Not reported	1	0.5			
			<b>Institution type</b>		
<b>Ethnicity</b>			Post '92	105	52.0
Asian Bangladeshi	2	0.9	Pre '92	41	20.3
Asian Chinese	5	2.9	Russell Group	56	27.7
Black African	5	2.9			
Black Caribbean	7	3.5	<b>Choice of institution</b>		
White	151	74.8	First choice	142	71.0
White & Asian	30	14.9	Second choice	29	14.5
Other Mixed	2	0.9	Clearing	22	11.0
			Moved to during degree	7	3.5
<b>Study mode</b>					
Full time	180	90	<b>Working whilst studying</b>		
Part time	12	6	Yes	48	23.0
Full / part time combination	8	4	No	142	71.0
			Not reported	12	6.0
<b>Distance from graduation</b>					
1971-1998	70	34.7	<b>Subject (Biglan 1973:207)</b>		
1998-2004	36	17.9	Hard pure	40	19.9
2004-2013	94	46.6	Hard applied	42	30.8
Not reported	2	1.0	Soft pure	66	32.7
			Soft applied	48	23.8
<b>Entry motivation</b>			Unidentified BSc/MSc	4	2
Expected to	21	10.4	Unidentified BA/MA	2	1
Career requirement	29	14.4			
Personal aspiration	101	50.0	<b>Status at time of survey</b>		
Expected & personal	25	12.4	Employed	155	76.7
Career & personal	9	4.5	Unemployed	7	3.5
Expected, personal & career	13	6.4	Studying	12	6.0
Other	3	1.5	Employed & studying	22	11.0
Not reported	1	0.5	Retired	4	2.0
			Unemployed & studying	2	1.0
<b>Classification</b>					
First class	44	21.8	<b>Classification compared to expectation</b>		
Upper Second 2:1	94	46.5	Higher	38	19.0
Lower Second 2:2	43	21.2	Lower	45	22.3
Unclassified second	2	1.0	As expected	79	39.1
Ordinary degree	7	3.5	Unsure	38	19.0
Third	6	3.0	Not reported	2	1.0
Other	6	3.0			

**Biglan's classification of disciplines** (Biglan 1973:207)

	<b>Hard</b>		<b>Soft</b>	
	<b>Life</b>	<b>Non-life</b>	<b>Life</b>	<b>Non-life</b>
<b>Pure</b>	Biology, Biochemistry, Genetics, Physiology, etc.	Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geology, Astronomy, Oceanography, etc.	Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, Area Study, etc.	Linguistics, Literature, Communications, Creative Writing, Economics, Philosophy, Archaeology, History, Geography, etc.
<b>Applied</b>	Agriculture, Psychiatry, Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Horticulture, etc.,	Civil Engineering, Telecommunication Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, etc.	Recreation, Arts, Education, Nursing, Conservation, Counselling, HR Management, etc.	Finance, Accounting, Banking, Marketing, Journalism, Library And Archival Science, Law, Architecture, Interior Design, Crafts, Arts, Dance, Music, etc.

## Appendix 10 Outputs arising from this thesis

Research Conference Poster: *What's in it for me? The value to an individual of an undergraduate degree*: University of Bedfordshire. June 2012.

Winning audience entry: *What's the value of a degree?* 3 minute thesis. University of Bedfordshire 2012.

Conference paper: *Understanding the value of the student experience from those who've been there, done that and worn the student T-shirt*  
Raise conference. University of Southampton September 2012.

Conference paper: *Widening participation - social justice or social injustice?*  
Society for Research into Higher Education University of Edinburgh April 2013.

Available online <http://www.srhe.ac.uk/events/details.asp?eid=77>

Conference presentation: *Illuminating the true value added by a degree*.  
University of Bedfordshire conference June 2013.

Conference workshop: *Working in partnership to improve engagement with learning*. Raise conference. Nottingham Trent University. September 2013.

Ingham, D. (2014) *Engagement perceptions and lessons from the graduate community*. Poster presented to the RAISE 14 conference. Manchester.

Ingham, D., Habimana, J and Walker, P. (2014)' *Involve me and I learn' – Students Think Big learning partnership*' Student Engagement and Experience Journal Vol.3, No.1 available at  
<http://research.shu.ac.uk/SEEJ/index.php/seej/article/view/83>

Collins, M., & Ingham, D. (2015) *Passing it on: how postgraduates can help undergraduates to develop final year dissertations*. Paper to the Teaching History in Higher Education conference, London, September 2015.

Collins, M., Booth, A., Ingham, D., Carpenter, K., Townend, J., Mali, S., and Jink, S. (2015) *Passing it on: How postgraduates can help undergraduates to develop research projects*. Conference Presentation to International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Melbourne, Australia, October 2015.  
Abstract available at  
<http://www.issotl2015.com.au/downloads/ISSOTL%202015%20Program%20Book%20WEB.PDF> p.196.

Paper submitted for RAISE journal Spring 2016: *An answer from research to the Teaching Excellence Framework – student engagement and graduate engagement to evidence legacy*.